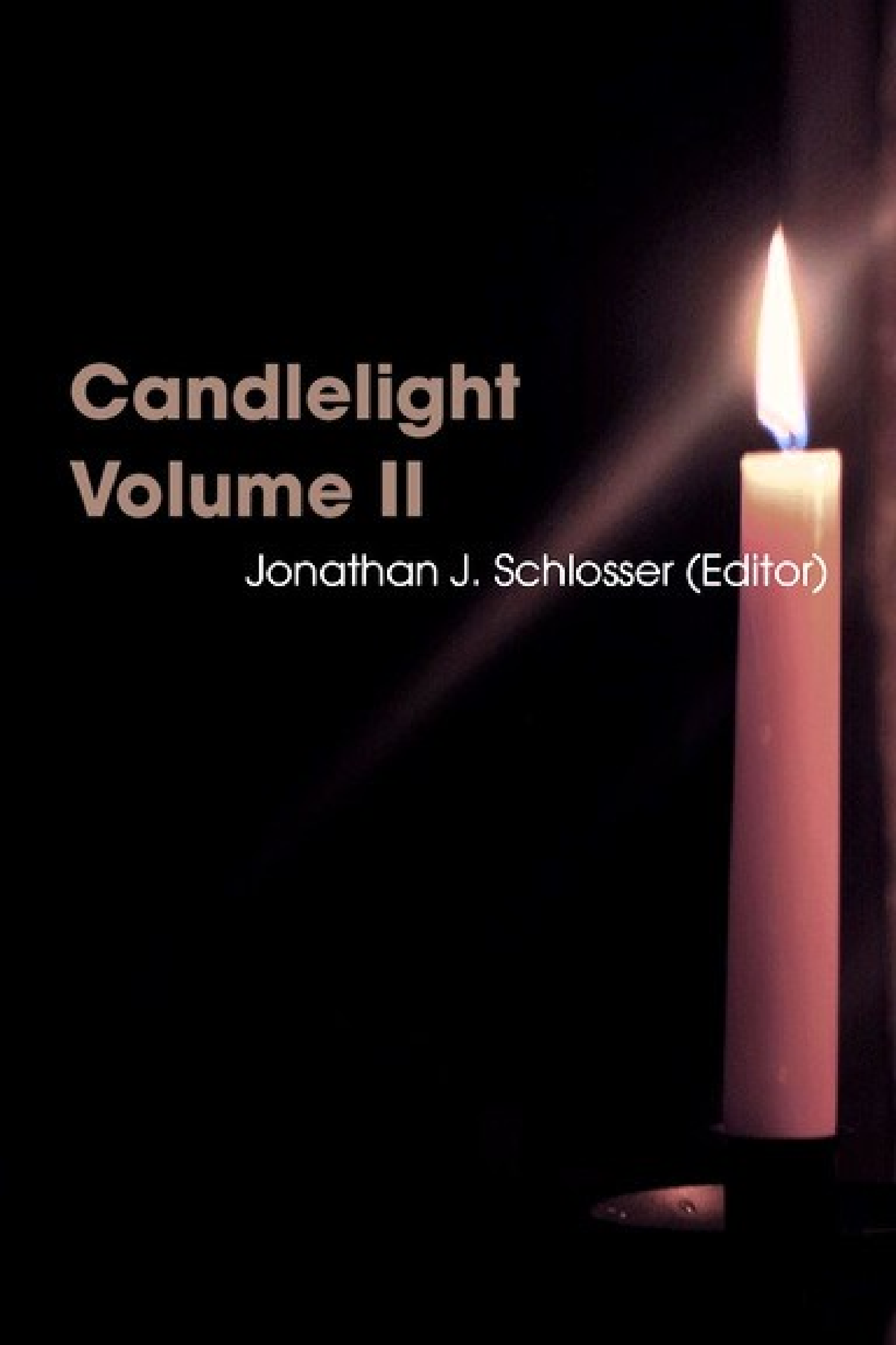

Candlelight Volume II

Jonathan J. Schlosser (Editor)

Candlelight

A Dark Anthology of the Supernatural

Volume II

Jonathan J. Schlosser, Editor

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A Word from the Editor

This is the second edition, now, which makes me quite proud to see it come to print. The first was exciting in it's own way, as the beginning of something new and something I'd been envisioning for months. But the second is exciting because it is the second. Because this means that the first was a success and that Candlelight will be able to continue on and become a full trilogy, as the best things are.

It has been a busy time. Between reading these stories, writing my own, working, and finishing my degree (at last), I've had a lot on my plate. Not to mention the time spent with friends, reading, playing in a band, volunteering with the homeless downtown, and all the other little things that come up along the way. It's been a busy time, but this volume, the second volume, it here at last.

Now, just a short word on reading, in general. I do a lot of it, as I suspect you, as someone who has purchased this book, do as well. And it is a great thing, a pastime that I hope is not losing followers. For a while, I thought it would be. Someone asked me, at work, why they even published books anymore. I had a number of replies that I wanted to give, but managed to say something polite and hopeful, instead. But those words stuck with me, made me nervous. Because why are they still putting out books? With most of

the world wrapped up in cheesy game shows and bad reality television, isn't it about time that reading came to an end? Isn't reading a worn-out bit of fun from days past, maybe something that was great for men who had no other forms of entertainment, but nothing worth spending our time with these days?

As you may have guess, I don't think so. As much as television and computers and movies have changed our entertainment, I don't think reading can ever be phased out. Because what is a movie but a written script, being read aloud? What is a computer but lines and lines of text? What is a television show but some writer's dream being realized and recorded with live action?

Also, I believe there is a large sector of society that will never stop buying books. That will never want to switch over to the fads that run across television, these shows that people love for a year, two years, but that then fade away and become nothing more than an old joke. Because a good book--Slaughterhouse Five, Fahrenheit 451, Moby Dick, Emma--will never become a joke. No one will ever look at it and scoff and say that the book was a big deal last year but is as good as forgotten. Books have a lasting power that nothing else has.

For the readers: worlds upon worlds.

For the writers: immortality.

Jon Schlosser
Grand Rapids, MI
May, 2009

Candlelight

Kaonashi

by Eliza Chan

The festival lanterns were strung up with steel string between the lampposts. They swung in the slight breeze, nodding first to the neon shop signs and festival flags, then to the revellers in the street below with their masks and fans. It was a gaudy night in the city. They had already lifted the portable shrine down the main street, its gold foil glory followed by a procession of drunkards, children and hand-woven sandals. They had already had the fan dancing and the taiko drummers. The streets were clearing like water in a sand pit, dripping away so quietly that Keisuke suddenly found that they were in the company of the drunks and the street-cleaners only.

"Neh," he said, touching the hand of his date, "are you hungry?"

She looked up at him, blushing like a cherry blossom tree in April, her cheeks as rosy as the flowers on her yukata. "Sorry, but I should go home. I don't want to miss the last subway."

They walked on, the lights fading around them, the warmth of the festival replaced by the stale smell of spoiling seafood and warm beer. The clip-clopping of Sumire's sandals reminded Keisuke of old samurai movies with swordfights in narrow alleyways. They made a good-looking couple, he thought, glancing at their reflection in the window of the coffee shop. He was tall and slim, his black hair to his shoulders softening the features of his face. He cultivated the look of cool but well-to-do: a dark blue suit, the suit jacket tossed carelessly over one shoulder, the shirt neck opened a little, the Gucci cufflinks winking whenever he ran his fingers through his hair. Sumire was petite, her head at his shoulder height, in a blue and pink yukata, a small fabric flower in her hair. Yes, in a samurai movie he would be the protagonist and she his wife. He would be a just, honourable man with legendary swordskills, hunted throughout Japan by people wanting to test their strength. But all he would really want was a quiet life with his beautiful lover. To stand admiring his rock garden or write calligraphy with a fine brush.

They made a good-looking couple. That's why he had invited Sumire to the festival in the first place. He knew heads would turn, jealous of either of them, wanting to be in that magazine-cover relationship. They were the pair you saw in advertisements buying a new car together, looking for a holiday in Korea or considering the appeals of the latest trendy restaurant.

The street opened up outside the junior high school, where a makeshift carnival had been erected for the three days. There was a brightly painted merry-go-round with dancing Chinese dragons and long-headed demons. There was a stall for catching goldfish in paper nets. There was candy floss, cartoon masks and flavoured ice cones. There was even a wonky house, a new edition to the yearly celebrations with wacky mirrors and rooms with no doors. The mirrors stood at the entrance, enticing customers in with their bizarre reflections.

"I had fun," Sumire said at the subway entrance, her face downward so that her hair covered most of it. She was cute when she was nervous, a puppy dog barking at an opened door.

"So did I. I'll call you, ok?" Keisuke said, smiling so that when she looked up Sumire would catch how genuine his face looked. Yes, appearances are everything, he thought. He watched as

she bowed gratefully and danced away in little skips, looking back twice to check that he was still there, waving her on.

It was tiring. Pretending to be that guy they had all read about in romance comics or seen on TV dramas. More than the thirty minutes he spent styling his hair every morning or the two hours every Saturday he would use to choose his clothes for the week.

Keisuke walked back the way he had come. It was different now that the lights had been switched off. His steps echoed as if his shadow was wearing his shoes on the other side of the wall. In the darkness he could hear people laughing in the distant, stumbled steps, a drunken joke. But he couldn't see them. The voices were all faceless, just out of reach. His feet were moving automatically now, one after another plodding along the pavement as Keisuke's mind wandered beneath the skirts of women and through the haze of other drunken nights.

There was a woman by the bridge. The river that intersected the north and the south of the city was spanned by a dozen bridges but only the red bridge was a pedestrian one. The woman was facing outwards, her hands gripping the edge. Her head and shoulders were bowed in the posture of someone weeping but she was silent. Something about her chilled Keisuke into partial sobriety. He wondered about her history, concocting an entire past in the five steps it took him to reach the bridge. She had an abusive husband and had reached the precipice. It was an attempted suicide. It quite ruined his mood to consider these as possibilities. But more than that, he knew that the worry would drive a frown across his playfully light-hearted face. That was why he did not like melancholy girls.

Keisuke considered pretending he had not seen her. A feat impossible considering the quietness of the night and the narrowness of the bridge. He considered muttering a soft "Good evening" and swiftly moving on. He considered phoning Sumire and chatting to her on the way home as an excuse for lack of concern. Apparently his conscience objected.

"Em… excuse me? Are you okay?" he asked, keeping a good two metres away from her so she wouldn't scream rape.

The woman's head turned a fraction at the sound of his voice but she did not look up. Her long black hair had obscured her

features and Keisuke was glad because he did not know how to deal with crying females.

"I mean, do you need help or something?" he continued, floundering in his own inadequate language skills. One of her hands let go of the bridge and disappeared under the curtain of hair. Wiping away tears, presumably, Keisuke thought, wishing he had not taken the shortcut home.

He took a few careful steps forward, aware of how he was babbling all the while, "It's just not safe for a woman to be out alone at this time. In the city. I mean I don't mean you any harm or anything… but other people might."

Did she understand Japanese, he wondered as she continued to show no reaction. Was she… simple? Her posture was so bad, her clothes incredibly out of fashion. She was wearing a loose white kimono, fraying all along its floor-length sleeves like she had run the edge across a grater.

"Please, do you have somewhere to go?"

Tentatively he placed his hand on her shoulder, wondering if she was deaf and had not heard any of his genuine-sounding concerns up until now. She was the same height as Sumire, but slimmer, and her hair was beautiful. He could not get over how soft her hair was. He felt it under his hand where it cascaded down her shoulder and it was like touching silk. She must be exquisite under that hair, Keisuke thought, wanting to see her now, wanting to see her more than he had wanted to see Sumire or Rena or even Ayu.

She turned towards him, his breath caught in his throat at the move. She turned and a small white hand pulled the long strands of hair away from her face. And she had no face. Where her eyes, her nose, her mouth should have been there was nothing but smooth pale skin.

Keisuke screamed, leaping back, his eyes still trained on the features that should have been there but were not. He stumbled over imaginary rocks, scrambling to get away from it. He ran.

The flashing red streetlights buzzed in his brain and he could not see his own feet but Keisuke ran on, the egg-smooth face still there before him. And she had turned, the beautiful hair falling away to show nothing. He stopped, an ache in his side and his overworked mind allying against him.

But it was late, and he was tired. He had been drinking earlier, he was wearing contacts that he should've binned by his optician's instructions, a month ago. She did have a face. She must've. He had fallen asleep whilst walking. He had probably scared that poor girl by screaming in her face. That was it. That was all. Just his imagination getting carried away.

His feet had carried him back to the carnival site, the mirrors of the wonky house reflecting his harried looking appearance. Keisuke peered at himself, now fat, now thin, now hourglass-shaped. His brown eyes peered back at himself, the pupils dilated. He could see the outline of his contacts, tiny submarine windows, the bloodshot veins creeping across the whites of his eyes. He could count the blackheads on his nose and the blemishes along his chin where he had shaved in a hurry. He closed his eyes in relief, wondering if he could just stand there all night like that.

"Keisuke?"

Keisuke started forward, only just preventing himself from smashing his head against the mirror. His eyes flicked open and he saw the distorted shape of a woman behind him. Long dark hair. Slight. He froze as the hair down his back pricked themselves up one by one.

"Keisuke? What's the matter. It's me, Sumire."

One hand on the mirror, he turned tentatively, his eyes squeezed together so he could only see through thin slits. The sandals, the pink and blue yukata. He forced himself to look further up. A hand clutching a drawstring purse, another hand holding a closed fan, a yellow obi belt. He opened his eyes fully, first one then the other. Sumire. A concerned pout on her lips, her small eyes wide with concern.

"Are you okay?" she asked, blinking.

Keisuke sobbed dryly and sank to his knees. "Oh god, thank god," he whispered to himself, not able to look anywhere but at his own hands and his own trousers. Sumire was beside him suddenly, her hand in his. "Come on."

How she got him to the ramen shop, Keisuke never knew. He found himself there, sitting at the counter with a steaming bowl of miso pork ramen before him, the disposable chopsticks already snapped apart and in his hand. Sumire was chatting merrily, mostly to make noise than to say anything of importance. She wiped his

brow with the moist towlette and refilled his untouched water glass. Her hand touched his wrist twice and his knee once.

Suddenly Keisuke was so glad she was there. He was so glad they were in this well-lit shop with its slurping customers and the clattering of miscellaneous kitchen sounds. He looked at the ramen cook with his dirty apron and the old man's wrinkled face was wonderful. Bent over the chopping board, cutting green vegetables with a wooden-handled knife, the cook seemed like hospitality itself. The wife, chatting to a regular at the other side of the counter was powdered like a hostess but her face was wonderful. Keisuke didn't care that she was built like a beach ball or that she was wearing a floral curtain. She had a face. The regular, his balding grey hair and boxy glasses atop a squashed brown nose, was wonderful. The newspaper by his elbow with photos of earthquake volunteers was wonderful. Sumire was wonderful.

There was a man on the TV in white tuxedo, singing into a shiny silver microphone with white-washed toothy smile. The menu looked like it had been scrawled by an intoxicated tanuki with a paint brush. Next to it, the chipped toothpick holder and box of tissues covered by a hideous embroidered monstrosity were lovely. The smell of spring onions and pickled ginger penetrated the air. The ashtray, crucible to a bellyful of grey ash and crooked cigarette ends was intoxicating. How normal it all was.

"Better?" she asked, as Keisuke finally looked at her. He nodded and took hold of her right hand.

"Thank you."

"Do you want to talk about it? I'm glad I missed the last train now, seeing you in such a state like that."

"I had horrible nightmare. I mean, I think it was a nightmare."

"A nightmare?"

"I met a woman on the red bridge. She looked liked she was crying so I went over to see what the matter was. Then she looked up. She looked at me and she didn't have a face."

Sumire nodded in understanding. "She didn't have a face."

"You don't think I'm mad?" he said in relief.

"Can you describe it?"

"It was… it just wasn't there. Like it was clay and someone had smoothed it over."

"Oh," the girl answered, "like this?" and she passed her hand over her own face and it wasn't there. It was just skin, as if someone had sewn it over her features, suffocating her beneath.

Keisuke fell off his chair, the chopsticks thrown at her in his shock. "What, what, what…?" he whimpered. The ramen cook looked up from his cutting board. He didn't have a face. The wife and the regular looked over at the commotion and neither of them had a face. On the TV screen, the singer didn't have a face.

The only one in the shop with a mouth, screamed. He threw his chair at Sumire, half-heartedly letting it splutter through the air in a truncated arc. Keisuke trembled, finding it difficult not to stare and draw on her features with his eyes. She stood up, her hands outspread as if in confusion, setting the chair back down, coming towards him.

He turned to the door, his reflection greeting him against the shop windows. His mouth had dropped open in a wide-eyed grimace and his entire face was grey. He could see them behind him, Sumire looking like she was about to cry, the other people standing awkwardly trying not to gawk too much.

Keisuke swivelled. Still no faces. He turned back to the faces in the mirror, preferring the distortion to anything he saw with his own eyes. He closed them tight, squeezing them like the last drops of moisture for a dying man in the desert. To be blind, to be ignorant right now. Keisuke hunched over and ran with his head down, back into the night.

It was 1.30 A.M., his watch told him, the digital face glowing firefly green in the dark. How much longer until sunrise, Keisuke thought. And was there anywhere in the city he could go where he was guaranteed not to meet other people?

The carnival loomed close once more, a lurching menace in his eye line, the pennants like dirty rags hanging out to dry in the erratic wind. Keisuke stopped, looking at his dark reflection in the distorted mirror. There were four of him now: the actual one, a fat one, a thin one, and one who was shaped like a spindle. Closer he came and then there were more of him, the angles of the mirrors set to multiply him in his various mutations to as far as the eye could see. He blinked and a dozen caricatures of him winked along. He raised a hand and thirty more reached out to touch it.

He looked hideous. Heavy bags under his eyes had drawn his entire face down. His hair had gathered in clumps of sweat and grease, hanging around his head like moth-eaten fringing on an old pair of curtains. His pristine shirt was untucked, lined and stained with sweat and smoke. He looked like a vagrant.

Clearing his throat, Keisuke made himself stand taller. He combed his hair back with his fingers as best he could and tucked his shirt back in. He had lost his jacket somewhere along the harrowing experience and one of his Gucci cufflinks had become a victim to the horrors also. Carefully, Keisuke removed the other one and placed it into his trouser pocket. He rolled up his sleeves in a casual but hard-working at some point in the indeterminable past look. He looked at himself.

It wasn't working. Keisuke shook out his hair, frustrated with how wrong it had gotten. It just wouldn't look right.

And then the woman's countenance flashed before him. Her head turning beneath the long black hair and nothing. Nothing.

Keisuke moved closer to the mirror, peering at his face intensely, wondering if he could do a self-portrait right now from what he saw. He touched his cheek, letting his hands feel the curves of his face.

"Keisuke…" a voice said softly.

He wouldn't turn this time, refused to take his eyes away from his own expression, sure that if he could just concentrate on it, things would be ok. The hand continued to roam. Nose, normal; eyebrows, present; lips, there.

"Keisuke?"

Sumire touched Keisuke on the shoulder and forced him to face her. His hands were covering his face, spread as if he was clawing at something. She held him by the shoulders, his trembling passing up her arms and causing her to shake also.

"Kei," she said softly, one hand slowly touching his. He flinched away from her, his head twitching to one side. Sumire saw herself in the distorted mirrors and half-stopped, confused by how strange they looked in the dim streetlight. She could see the side of his face reflected in the polished surface, saw it and nearly bolted.

"Kei," she said once more, her hands remaining as they were but sweating now, clammy and cold against his.

"It's still there, isn't it? Everything's still there? I can't feel it, I can't feel anything…" he replied softly. Keisuke turned his face towards her, "It's still there, isn't it?"

Sumire looked at the mirror.

Eliza Chan
May, 2009

Eliza Chan started writing because, as a child, every book she read eventually ended and the real world was boring in comparison. After studying English Literature and History at the University of Glasgow, she realised how subversive books could be and ever since she's written stories that even she can't define or summarise well. She particularly likes writing about crazy women, unreliable narrators and snow.

Currently residing in Japan, she is heavily influenced by contemporary and traditional Asian culture and society. She lives in Sapporo and teaches English when she isn't singing karaoke or writing in coffee shops. Previous publications include short stories featured *New Writing Scotland 26* and the British Fantasy Society's *New Horizons 2*. She remains a long-distance member of the Glasgow Science Fiction Writers' Circle.

The Passenger

J.J. Beazley

Scotland is a land of extremes. On a sunny summer's day, the remoter parts provide some of the most picturesque landscapes to be found anywhere in Britain. The lochs and mountains, the rushing rivers and deep gorges, the characterful crofts and Aberdeen Angus cattle are famed throughout the world for their ability to delight the eye and refresh the senses. Publishers of postcards, calendars and coffee table books have lived well off the fat of its land for decades.

On a cold, wet night, however, when a razor-sharp wind rushes up the glens, tearing at the trees and howling hideously in the chimneys, the difference could not be more marked. Nowhere else do you feel quite such a sense of restless, elemental forces on the prowl. Nowhere else do you feel quite such a conviction that

you are being encircled and entrapped by something powerful and unseen, trying the windows and shaking the roof timbers.

I have stayed in a loch-side cottage on such a night. I have heard the knocking on the window, seen inanimate objects tap against the wall, and felt my skin tingle from the growing suspicion that the unknowable wasn't far away. I was glad I wasn't alone, and I would have taken some persuading to open the door.

It was on just such a night that fate conspired with elements such as these to place upon me the burden of a most unusual passenger.

Ω

There is a main road in northern Scotland that is as wild and lonely as any you might find anywhere. Running north-west from the Black Isle and Easter Ross, it crosses the high upland country between the Western Highlands and the northern mountains. For mile upon mile the scenery consists of endless bogs, with bare-sided lochs dotted here and there to lend some minor relief to the unremitting brown-green of the stark landscape. Occasional glimpses of solitary mountains on the northern skyline are the only other notable feature and the drive is a tedious one. I had travelled it twice during previous trips to Scotland but, on the last occasion, there was not even the glimpse of a loch or distant mountain to ease the monotony.

It was about ten o'clock on a rough and rainy night in mid August. I had left Inverness an hour or so earlier and was on my way to Ullapool where I intended to stay overnight before catching the ferry to Stornaway the next day. A light drizzle had started to fall as I set off and a stiff north-easterly had built up to accompany it. The rain had become progressively heavier with the gathering darkness and the wind had strengthened to a full blown gale. By ten o'clock the night was well and truly black, and I was glad indeed to be secure in the warm and waterproof cockpit of a car.

Driving alone on a dark, open road with no streetlights or other reference points is a strangely compelling experience. The visible world consists solely of that picked out by the car headlights and focuses the mind into a narrow tunnel of perception. The endless procession of moving white lines and road edges leads to an

almost mesmeric state in which anything other than the tarmac, the verges and the passing trees becomes a distant irrelevance. On the night in question the rocking of the windscreen wipers might have been a hypnotist's fob watch as they fought the swathes of lashing rain. What little could be seen of the outside world was being swept in and out of clarity with a regular and relentless certainty. It was during one clear interlude that I saw a light coloured shape appear in the distance ahead of me.

My concentration sharpened immediately and I focussed on the looming and ever-brightening image. It soon became clear that, whatever it was, it was on the road. I slowed instinctively and checked my rear view mirror. There was only intense blackness behind me and I felt relieved to be able to pay full attention to the obstruction. Within seconds it took the growing form of a figure dressed in white. Closer still, it became a woman clad in some form of lightweight garment, like a shift or nightdress, which hung in one piece from her shoulders to her knees.

She was walking directly towards me in the middle of the left hand carriageway. Her arms hung limply by her side and she walked slowly but purposefully in a straight line. The sight of such a spectral vision on such a night as that was unnerving, but I was not inclined to be fanciful and soon dismissed the fleeting notion that she was anything other than flesh and blood.

My first reaction was one of sheer astonishment, my second was pity, my third was suspicion. The natural desire to rescue a fellow human being was being tempered by the knowledge that highway robbery was making a comeback. I was also concerned that being alone with a strange young woman could leave me open to obvious accusations and the threat of blackmail. I had heard of such things happening. And it occurred to me that she could be mentally deranged, the prospect of which was the most terrifying of all

Other thoughts sped through my brain too. Could she be a sleepwalker from some nearby croft? Surely the cold rain would have brought her to her senses. Could she have been dumped by an irate boyfriend following an argument? No, I decided, she would look more agitated.

By now I was coming to a halt a matter of yards in front of her. Despite my fears, the prospect of driving around her was out of the question. I had no mobile phone then and I knew that the

nearest public telephone could be half an hour's drive away. She might be in the throes of terminal pneumonia by the time I got the emergency services to her.

She continued to walk towards my car and I could see in the glare of my headlights that the thin, wet garment was all she was wearing. Most of it clung tightly to the contours of her body while the extremities flapped in the wind. At least there was no possibility of her having a concealed weapon, I thought. As she approached the front of the car she veered to her left and walked on, passing the driver's door and heading into the blackness of the night. Surprised and slightly irritated, I threw caution to the wind and jumped out.

"Excuse me," I shouted to the darkening figure.

As my voice rang out, she halted and stood for a second. Then she turned around slowly and walked back in my direction. She stopped a few feet from me and stared into my face. At least, I assumed she was looking at my face. It was too dark to be certain that she wasn't merely staring into the space beyond.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked, with a mixture of nervousness and incredulity.

She said nothing, but continued to stand perfectly still, looking straight ahead.

"Are you lost or what?"

She remained silent. By now *I* was feeling wet and cold. I could hardly imagine how she must have been feeling. I decided that this conversation, if it ever became a conversation, should be continued in the warmth of the car. I unlocked the rear door and opened it. Still she stood motionless.

"I think you should get in," I said.

She didn't move and I became impatient.

"Please, *get in*."

At the direct request she dutifully climbed into the car and sat bolt upright, her hands resting limply on the seat either side of her. I slammed the door shut and climbed back into the driver's seat. I switched on the interior light to get a better look at her. Her sopping wet hair was long and looked black in the weakly illuminated interior of the car. I could see the water running off her fringe and dripping off the ends of her nose and chin. She displayed

no expression in her face, and her dark eyes continued to look straight ahead. I judged her to be in her mid to late teens.

I wiped the wetness from my own forehead and prepared to drive on. Then I realised that she was sitting immediately behind me and that made me nervous. Thoughts of wet, ice-cold fingers clasped around my throat took shape in my imagination and I shuddered visibly at the prospect. I turned around and asked her to move over to the other side. Again, she did as I asked, but only moved a little way so that she was sitting in the centre of the rear seat. That would have to do, I thought, but decided to leave the interior light on so as to be aware of any movement on her part. Duly satisfied, I drove off.

There was no conversation. I asked her every question I could think of but she remained quiet and impassive. I glanced frequently at her through the mirror and found myself drawn to her eyes which, although I couldn't see them clearly in the dim light, appeared uncommonly dark and mesmerised. After a while I realised that I had never seen her blink, despite the cold water that was still dripping from her hair and trickling down her forehead.

Eventually I gave up talking and concentrated on the practical question of what to do with her. I assumed that there would be a police station in Ullapool and the obvious course of action was to take her there. I was anxious to be free of the responsibility and the police are the natural repository for all troublesome burdens. I drove on, still glancing frequently in the mirror, until the sight of her sitting motionless became predictable to the point of being mundane.

It was just before eleven when I entered the outskirts of the town and began to look out for some passer-by who might direct me to the police station. The streets were deserted and I began to consider the prospect of driving around in a methodical pattern until I found it.

To my relief I saw a patrol car parked a little way ahead and pulled in behind it. Thankfully, it was occupied and I switched off the engine. I turned to my passenger and told her to stay where she was. I would be back shortly, I said. I got out and walked the few paces to the driver's door.

By now the rain had stopped and the constable in the driving seat had his window half open. I leant forward and

explained the circumstances as briefly as I could. He said nothing during the course of my account and, when I had finished, he merely said:

"Better take a look then."

He and his companion got out and walked with me back to my vehicle. All the doors were still shut and I opened the driver's side rear. The car was empty. Annoyed and a little confused, I spluttered an insistence that I hadn't made it up. She really had been there.

"Dressed only in a nightie, you say? The tourists get all the luck, don't they Malcolm?"

He shot a smirk at his companion, who chuckled in return. Neither seemed particularly impressed by my story, even when I reached into the car and pointed out to them that the upholstery in the centre of the back seat was sopping wet. Both of them displayed that slow, studied quality of movement and deliberation that one associates with the highlander.

"Must have made her escape while we were talking," he said.

"Surely we would have heard the car door slam," I offered.

He shrugged his shoulders and began to write something in his notebook while his companion stood yawning to one side.

"Nothing surprises me in this job anymore. We get a lot of strange hitchhikers in these parts at this time of the year. Though I must admit, young women in nighties are not exactly typical. Probably one of those new-age traveller types - had an argument with her boyfriend and he threw her out. She was probably in a state of shock. We'll take a drive round and see if we can see her; and we'll put a report in, in case there have been any missing persons. Where are you staying?"

I gave him the name of the hotel near the ferry terminal into which I had booked that morning. He obliged me with directions and assured me that they would let me know if they found anything. I climbed back into my car and followed the policeman's route, checking my mirror occasionally and half expecting to see my passenger reappear.

She didn't. The whole episode was already taking on the quality of a dream and I began to wonder whether I had witnessed one of those roadside ghosts I had read about. When I parked the

car outside the hotel I felt the back seat again. It was still wet. I decided that ghosts don't drip water and settled upon the policeman's explanation as the most likely one.

I gathered my luggage and went into the hotel. It was a comfortable old building, probably Victorian, which had escaped any significant degree of modernisation. There was a smell of old wood, leather and fresh-cut flowers in the air, and I was greeted by a prim and pleasant middle-aged woman who introduced herself as Mrs Campbell. She was the owner of the establishment, jointly with her husband.

We completed the usual formalities and she proceeded to conduct me towards my room. As we crossed the lobby, I noticed a half open door in the corner, obviously leading to the owners' private apartments. An elderly woman with a shock of long, grey hair stood motionless a little way inside. Her hands were held clasped in front of her skirt and her face carried a frown. She was staring at me intensely and I fancied that her eyes carried the desire to communicate. Given the strange happenings of the previous hour, I thought I was probably over-reacting and looked away as my guide began to climb the thinly carpeted, creaky staircase.

"Don't mind mother," said Mrs Campbell with an affable smile. "She's getting a wee bit senile. She's quite harmless."

My room was small and unprepossessing, but did have the benefit of an en suite bathroom consisting of a lavatory, washbasin and pedestal shower. I was glad of the shower after my long drive and was soon settled under a welcoming hot spray. As I relaxed, my thoughts turned again to the mysterious young woman. I wondered whether the police had found her yet. Surely she couldn't have got far dressed the way she was. Indeed she hadn't.

A mirror hung over the washbasin, situated on the wall that faced the shower. It was placed half way between the cubicle and the door to the bedroom which I had left open, and reflected a comprehensive view of the doorway and the room beyond. I caught sight of a movement out of the corner of my eye and looked sharply at the glass.

There, standing just inside the bedroom and framed eerily by the doorway, was my erstwhile passenger. She was still dressed in the knee-length garment and stood perfectly still, with her hands

hanging limply by her side and looking directly at me through the mirror. Her fixed and silent stare was as expressionless as before.

A creeping sense of shock and terror crept quickly across my shoulders and I spent the next few seconds staring back. Then I came to my senses. I grabbed the towel that I had put on a nearby chair, wrapped it around my middle and walked quickly towards the door. I looked around it nervously, hoping desperately that the vision was no more than a figment of my overwrought imagination.

The bedroom was empty. The only item that was not a fixture or fitting was my suitcase that stood open on the bed where I had left it. I felt the carpet where I estimated she had been standing and there was some dampness there. I reasoned that it had probably come off my own wet body as there was a minor trail running back across the floor and into the bathroom.

It wasn't difficult to tell myself that I was tired and prey to a fruitful imagination. I wasn't entirely convinced, however, and decided that the prospect of re-entering the shower was too uncomfortable. I returned to the bathroom and switched it off, taking care to face the door as I did so. The thought of some white-clad apparition appearing behind me filled my mind and chilled my blood. I walked back into the bedroom drying myself, then donned fresh underwear and t-shirt in preparation for going to bed.

Going to bed! That was a difficult prospect to contemplate. However much I told myself that the young woman's second appearance was no more than a product of my overtaxed imagination, the memory of her image in the mirror was too potent to push aside so easily.

I busied myself for as long as I could with simple routines, putting off the thought of that final moment when I would have to settle into bed and switch off the light. I cleaned my teeth - consciously avoiding the mirror on the wall - combed my hair, and took some fresh clothes out of my suitcase ready for the morning. The moment arrived when there was nothing left to do. I made sure that the bedroom door was locked, climbed into bed and sat there for a while with the light on.

I felt silly and cowardly as I sat upright, trying to drum up the necessary courage to switch off the light and go to sleep. Eventually I decided to do it in stages. I got back out of bed and opened the curtains covering the single window situated on the

opposite wall. I climbed back in and forced myself to press the switch on the lamp.

The darkness was intense for a few seconds, but abated as my eyes adjusted to the light coming from the street outside my window. I could see the details of the room clearly enough to feel assured that nothing could approach me unseen. But I still lay for a while, staring at the door and feeling that same prickle of nervous apprehension creeping across my shoulders. Eventually I drifted into sleep.

I started dreaming immediately. I saw my passenger standing in a bleak, open landscape, still dressed in the familiar white shift but otherwise looking much more alive. Her eyes were full of expression and seemed to be begging me to do something. Her arms were held out towards me and her mouth was moving as though she were trying to speak. I asked her what she wanted, but no sound came from her lips. And there were dark shapes moving around her, constantly changing and so indistinct as to be effectively formless. They seemed to be holding her and pulling her away from me.

How long the dream continued I couldn't tell. Time has no reality in dreams. It seemed to go on interminably until the shapes pulled her underground and I was left standing alone among the dark heather that shivered incessantly in the keen wind. I felt the force of it on my body, and my left ear was stinging from the sharpness of its icy blast. Then I found myself drifting back into consciousness, aware of an uncomfortable coldness down my left side.

I assumed that the window must be open and that I was being troubled by a cold draught. I stretched out my left hand to make sure that the bedclothes were tucked in on that side. My hand touched the cold, clammy wetness of sodden fabric. And, beyond that, there was something more solid. I turned sharply and looked directly into the pallid face of my travelling companion. She was lying next to me on her back, with her face turned towards me on the pillow. Her eyes were inches from mine.

For a few seconds – or was it longer, I don't know - any possibility of movement on my part was impossible. My limbs were frozen as I stared into the lifeless eyes of the young woman. Then an uncontrollable cry surged from my lips, borne of the most

intense fear and panic. I leapt out of bed and rushed across the room to where I knew the light switch was located. After some agonising fumbling, I found it and the room was flooded with bright light from the shaded bulb on the ceiling. I looked back at the bed, eyes wide with fearful expectation. It was empty.

I stood for a while, breathing heavily and looking around the room to be sure that the apparition really had gone. I looked in the bathroom, under the bed and in the wardrobe. There was nowhere else big enough to conceal a person. I sank into the armchair on which I had earlier placed my change of clothes, breathing hard and shaking visibly. After a while a sense of reason began to return. I supposed that the figure in the bed had been an extension of my dream and began to feel less nervous in the comforting light of a hundred watt bulb.

It occurred to me that I hadn't checked the bed itself. I looked at it from my position in the armchair. The pillow did look to have patches of wetness on it. No doubt it was just a trick of the light, I told myself. I got up nervously, walked over to the bed and threw back the covers. The left hand side was wet from top to bottom.

There was no question of getting back under those covers. I got dressed and took out a cigarette. There was a no smoking policy in the hotel but this was no time to be following rules. I opened the window and looked out onto the street, drawing long on the cigarette and flicking the ash towards the pavement below.

I looked at my watch. It was four thirty and I knew that I would have an hour or more to wait before the first glimmers of daylight consigned this terrifying night to history. The hour passed slowly and I smoked several more cigarettes, dividing my time between the window and the armchair.

Eventually I heard the sound of chinking crockery coming from somewhere beneath me. I realised that the kitchen must be located there and that I would soon be able to take breakfast and escape.

But could I escape? Whoever the lady was, she seemed to have latched onto me and I faced the possibility that she would continue to haunt my nights until I could find some sort of resolution. The idea was daunting and I hoped that I would leave

her behind when I left her territory. At 7.30 I went down to breakfast.

I was still feeling agitated and bewildered, and my mood was not helped by the young woman who took my order. She was slim and pretty with long dark hair and a pale complexion. I shivered inwardly at being reminded of my passenger. And then I saw the same old lady that I had seen the night before. She was standing in the doorway of the dining room, clearly looking at me with some intensity and an expression of concern.

I was becoming a little weary of the sight of women giving me their undivided attention from the framework of doorways. The image is a little unnerving at the best of times, and my present situation could hardly be so described. Nevertheless, I smiled at her politely, hoping that she would go away when she realised that I had seen her. She didn't. Instead she came into the room and walked directly to my table. Her expression seemed all the more intense when seen at close quarters and in the context of a face lined with the experience of seven or eight decades.

"May I speak to you for a moment?" she asked.

Her voice carried the gentle lilt of an old fashioned highlander.

"Of course," I replied, successfully hiding an inner reluctance. "Do have a seat."

She accepted the offer, never taking her eyes from mine.

"I am Mrs McDonald, Mrs Campbell's mother," she began hesitatingly. "You saw me in the lobby last night when you booked in."

I nodded politely and she continued.

"What I am going to say will seem a little strange to you."

I couldn't help mumbling the obvious reply.

"I doubt it, not after last night".

It was meant to be ironic and said by way of a passing remark, but the old lady's expression altered appreciably on hearing it and showed a visible degree of relief.

"You will know, then, that you brought somebody in with you?"

I was unsure whether to feel relieved or dismayed and said nothing for a few seconds. For some reason I felt guarded, and restricted my reply to "Did I?"

"You did," she said.

There was another brief silence and I decided that openness was the only sensible policy.

"Could you see her then?" I asked.

"I could, as plainly as I see you. I was born a McRae and raised in the shadow of the Seven Sisters. All the women in my family have the sight."

I had heard of "the sight"; highland women are reputed to be very psychic.

"What did you see?"

She smiled slightly.

"You are testing me," she said with a hint of gentle accusation. "You know what I saw. A pale young lassie with long black hair, dressed in a white shift that was wet from being out in the rain. She followed your every movement while you were booking in and went upstairs with you. I felt her presence all night and couldn't sleep. In the early hours I heard a cry and footsteps running across the floor. I thought of coming to you then, but I felt that you were in no danger. She means you no harm."

By now, any doubts I had were removed. I felt massively relieved to find someone with obvious knowledge in these matters to share my experience.

"Tell me how you met her," continued the old woman.

I started to give her a brief description of the circumstances, but she stopped me.

"I need everything," she said. "Every single little fact, however trivial it might seem."

There was a lull in the conversation as the waitress placed a plate of scrambled eggs and toast before me. She asked the old lady if she wanted anything and was answered with a brief shake of the head. I continued without starting my breakfast, giving her every single fact and circumstance as well as I could remember them. When I had finished, the old lady sat looking at the table for a while.

"Is she a ghost?" I asked.

"No," replied the old lady, "she is not a ghost. She is something infinitely more sad and difficult to deal with. Ghosts are able to move on and can be persuaded to do so with the right approach. She has no such option."

That worried me. It sounded as though I might be shackled forever to a watery wraith that is given to making impromptu and spine tingling appearances several times a day. I was reminded of Noel Coward's Blithe Spirit and my dismay was briefly mixed with some small degree of ironic humour. The old lady looked into my eyes again.

"Do you believe in fairies?" she asked, with a directness that took me by surprise.

Dismay and ironic humour were now joined by incredulity. Ghosts I could accept, but fairies were surely the stuff of childhood fantasy.

"Does anybody?" I replied.

She rocked back on her chair and uttered a scornful chuckle.

"Not these days. Everyone is so 'rational' now. They all believe the scientists when they say that nothing exists if it cannot be studied and measured in their laboratories. Of course they exist. There are worlds parallel with ours in which all sorts of beings exist. Brownies and kelpies – or fairies, elves and goblins as you have it in English – live in one of those worlds, and they are more aware of us than we are of them. Sometimes, in the more remote areas, they will steal a human baby and replace it with some stunted and ugly offspring of their own. The stolen child is taken back to their land and brought up as one of them. It is a terrible tragedy."

I remained circumspect during the explanation, not sure that I was prepared to believe any of it. I politely observed that such an occurrence must be terribly upsetting for the parents.

"The tragedy is much more the child's," said Mrs McDonald

"Why?"

"Because the fairy folk have no souls. We humans can aspire to spiritual growth, go the heaven if you like - though it's not as simple as that, whatever the Christian priests tell you. We live for a while, then discard our earthly bodies and call it death. Then we come back and live again, and do this over and over again until we're ready to move on to another stage.

"They live forever. They have no death as we understand it. But that means they cannot progress, and any human child living in their world is under the same curse. Your lassie is just such an

unfortunate and is obviously trying to get back to her own world. She has apparently learned to control the state of her body so that, for short periods, she can appear physically again. But it takes a great effort and uses all her concentration. That's why she appears to be in a trance.

"When she first heard your voice she was able to latch onto you, but could then only respond to direct orders. When you saw her in your dream, you were seeing her 'normal' self and she was begging you to help her to come back."

This was heady stuff and difficult to take in. But I had to take it further.

"And can I bring her back?" I asked.

"It's not as simple as that. She can only come back if those who are holding her allow it. It would be very difficult to persuade them to do that and you wouldn't know where to start approaching them. Even I would find it difficult. I have talked to the little folk often, but never about that. It is not a fit subject for conversation and they are very reticent. I could try, of course.

"But there is a much bigger question. Do you realise what would happen if we did manage to bring her back? A young woman suddenly appearing in a world that has to know everything about you from your date of birth to the size of your shoes? They have us tagged like the beasts in the field, with certificates of this and certificates of that, centralized records and social security numbers.

"We couldn't keep her hidden forever. Eventually the police would get involved and they would presume that she'd lost her memory or something and turn her over to the medical people. They might decide that she had lost her mind and send her to some institution. Then the newspapers would hear about it, and they would start prodding and prying and making her life a misery.

"Do you want to bring an innocent and unsuspecting young lassie into such a world? Where she is at the moment she has a comfortable life with no pain or fear of death. The only real point in getting her back would be so that she could die and feel all the sorrows and pains along the way."

Mrs McDonald fell silent and I mused for a while on what she had said. Her daughter's assessment of her as "senile" was clearly wide of the mark. Perhaps Mrs Campbell was a good citizen of the modern world and "senile" was a euphemism for "nutty".

That wasn't my view. Old Mrs McDonald's directness and matter-of-fact manner had convinced me and I offered the logical answer to her question.

"Surely," I said "that's the point. How could we, in all conscience, knowingly stand back and allow a human being to remain trapped in a world to which she doesn't belong, however comfortable. If what you say is true, wouldn't we be denying her soul its most fundamental right?"

Mrs McDonald's smile carried a hint of sadness and uncertainty.

"You learn quickly," she said. "But how can we know that she realises what she is asking? I doubt she has seen much of cities and hospitals and police stations."

A thought struck me.

"I take it she isn't here at the moment?"

"No," said the old woman. "Their vibrations are much lower than ours. Daylight is too strong for them. That's why they are usually seen at twilight and at night."

"So the likelihood is that she will come back tonight. Couldn't you talk to her and explain everything?"

"No. You have seen the state she's in when she takes physical form and, even when she drops it and only I can see her, she will be too weak and confused to understand the workings of modern civilization. Heaven knows, *I* find it difficult enough most of the time.

"We must take the responsibility upon ourselves, or rather you must. It's you she has latched onto. You could, of course, escape her by carrying on with your ferry trip. She won't follow you over water and she will be gone by the time you come back."

"How did you know I was planning a ferry trip?" I asked her.

How silly of me. Of course, she had "the sight."

"My daughter told me after you had gone to your room last night. I enquired after you."

Mrs McDonald added honesty to her list of credentials.

I didn't have to think long about the dilemma. The young woman was crying out to me to help her and had obviously put great effort into her ability to materialise. Rightly or wrongly, the

romantic in me took precedence over the pragmatic and I knew there was no contest.

"We have to try," I said.

"Very well," said Mrs McDonald with some reluctance.

She fell silent for a while, obviously thinking. I felt that I shouldn't interrupt but waited for her to speak again.

"Do you have anything made of gold?"

"Gold? Why gold?"

"Because we will have to offer something valuable to compensate them for giving her back, and the little folk are very fond of gold."

She looked at my right hand. I was wearing a signet ring that my mother had given to me for my twenty first birthday. I was very attached to it and said so.

"Then it is all the more valuable," said the old lady.

I prised it off with some difficulty and handed it to her. I asked her what form the exchange would take. Could it be done in the privacy of the hotel?

"Good heavens, no. We must go to the place from which she was taken."

My heart sank. How on earth could we know that?

"It's not so difficult," said the old woman. "She would have appeared at the same place where she entered the other world. That is where the gateway is. You told me that you met her about half way between here and Inverness. There is a ruined croft some way along an old track about there. It's the only one for miles around and there is a well known fairy rath nearby. I have been there before and felt the presence of the gateway between this world and theirs. Besides, I kept seeing it over and over again during the night. I have no doubt that is the place."

I had no option but to trust her judgement and asked what I should do next.

"Nothing for the time being. Be in the lobby at..." She paused, obviously calculating something. "...six thirty. Be dressed for the outdoors. Do you have a second coat?"

"No," I said. "Why?"

"In case we are successful," she replied, as though the answer should have been obvious.

She got up and walked away, leaving me with an untouched breakfast that was now cold. The waitress came over when she saw Mrs McDonald leave.

"Would you like another breakfast?"

"No thanks." I wasn't hungry.

"Some coffee then?"

"OK. Please."

She brought a pot and I sat for some time looking out of the window, musing on the incredible events of the previous twelve hours. I helped myself to two cups of coffee in quick succession and then became aware that the waitress was anxious for me to leave so that she could tidy the room. I wanted a cigarette anyway. I returned to my room to collect the packet and went out for a walk.

I remember little of what I did that day. I know I wandered aimlessly around, taking some superficial interest in the shop displays and the ferries coming and going. I had a sandwich in a pub at midday, but it was more out of habit than necessity. I was in an almost dreamlike state myself, and I do remember thinking that there were those who might describe me as being "away with the fairies." More ironic amusement.

I was, of course, impatient for six thirty to come around, although the thrill of excitement was mixed with a natural fear of dabbling with dark forces. And the realisation that the mission was by no means guaranteed to succeed caused me some anxiety.

I had calculated that the reason for leaving at six thirty was that an hour's drive to the appointed spot would still leave a little daylight. How much would depend on the state of the sky. Down at sea level it was moderately bright, but I knew that it could be different up on higher ground. A dense cloud cover would see the darkness fall more quickly.

By five o'clock I was thoroughly bored with the limited scenery of the town and my anxiety was naturally increasing. I returned to the hotel and went up to my room. On the way I passed Mrs Campbell in the lobby and her quizzical look made it obvious that she knew something was going on. I doubted that she knew the full story and I said nothing apart from exchanging a polite greeting.

I sat in my room until 6.15, remembering vividly the events of the previous night. I wondered how the chambermaid had reacted to the wet sheets and whether that had some bearing on

Mrs Campbell's strange look. The recollection of the young woman's appearances was strong and I shuddered with an echo of the terror I had felt at finding her lying next to me. It made me all the more certain that our intended course was the right one. I pulled on my stout walking shoes and my waterproof coat and went down to the lobby.

Mrs McDonald was already there, engaged in earnest and slightly agitated conversation with her daughter. They were speaking too quietly for me to catch the detail, but the younger woman's face carried a look that I translated as shock and annoyance, and her posture conveyed the same message. I had the impression that she had been prepared for some possibility that was disagreeable to her. She walked away sharply as I approached.

Mrs McDonald picked up a large carrier bag, nodded to me and led the way to the door. We were soon settled in the car and heading off on the main road towards Inverness.

As we drove I tried to make conversation a couple of times. It soon became clear that the old woman wanted silence and I had to be content to respect the fact. She did turn her head towards me in a sudden and disarming manner occasionally, taking a sharp breath and staring at me intensely with her piercing blue eyes. I felt something akin to a mild electric shock every time she did so, but I tried to ignore it. And then she said

"They know we're coming."

What was that all about? I had no idea, but I was beginning to feel distinctly nervous. She did answer my next question.

"What are the fairies like?"

"They are like us," she said, "only more extreme. The nice ones are cheery and helpful, but some are more hideous than anything you will find in this world."

The journey continued in silence.

We climbed rapidly into the country of wild heath and scattered lochs and the sky darkened appreciably. The cloud cover was becoming heavier, and the odd lonely tree indicated that the wind was getting stronger. Eventually the old lady told me to slow down and leaned forward in her seat, squinting at the land to the right of the road.

"There," she said triumphantly, and pointed to a track that led off across the heath. "Take that road."

Road? It might have been a "road" in the days of horse-drawn vehicles, but I was reluctant to take a modern car down it. I didn't argue but did as I was told and drove slowly for about a mile, avoiding the humps and potholes as best I could.

The track led us to the remains of a croft, standing forlorn amid a harsh, uncompromising landscape. As we approached I could see that the roof was gone but the outer walls seemed largely intact. A group of smaller walls formed a sheiling, but there was nothing else and I found it hard to believe that people had lived and farmed there, probably for centuries.

"This is the place," said Mrs McDonald. "Take the car as near as you can and turn it around to face back to the road - and leave the doors unlocked."

I did as I was told and turned off the engine. We got out of the car, Mrs McDonald with a bustling intensity of purpose and me feeling slightly bewildered and wondering what I should do next. I looked at the gaunt shape of the roofless and windowless croft standing starkly against the sky. It put me in mind of a skeleton and I began to feel afraid.

The land was desolate, the wind was gusting strongly in my face and the grey clouds that scudded overhead carried a dark and brooding menace. But that wasn't the source of my fear. There was something else. An irrational but intense feeling of depression and anxiety was closing in on me. I felt that I was being encircled by some power or energy that did not mean me well.

"Come over here," said the old lady, who was kneeling on the course grass in front of the croft. "I need your physical strength to draw on."

I felt that my physical strength was draining rapidly already, but did as she ordered and knelt beside her. Her hands were folded on her lap and her eyes were closed. She began to breathe more slowly and then started mumbling low words in a language that I didn't recognise, but which I assumed to be Gaelic.

My depression increased with each passing minute and every mysterious phrase, until it approached the level of despair. I felt a massive urge to run back to the car and drive away at high speed. I thought I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye, and then another one. I looked towards them but saw nothing. And then more movements, sometimes three or four at a time, but

always outside the centre of my vision. Were these the shapes I had seen in my dream?

All the time the wind was becoming stronger and howling angrily through the ruins of the building. I wondered how much longer my nerve would hold and began to look agitatedly in all directions. I knew that I was approaching a state of panic, but also that it was vital for me to remain in position. It was with both shock and relief that I saw Mrs McDonald suddenly lift her hands to her head and heard her utter a final cry. She dropped her hands back to her lap and said

"He'll do it. There's no time to lose."

"Who'll do what exactly?" I stuttered, feeling weak, miserable and exhausted, but with a sense of triumphant expectation now shoring up my spirits.

She didn't answer me but got up, taking my signet ring from her pocket, and walked quickly towards the croft. I had no desire to be left alone in that accursed place and followed her as fast as my weakened legs would allow.

"I have talked to the one who is their leader – and a more hideous creature I have never seen before and never want to see again - and he has agreed to exchange the lassie for your gold ring. When one of his kind makes a bargain he has to keep to it. It's a law to them. But the others don't, so we have to get her away as quickly as possible."

We entered the hole in the wall where a door had once hung to keep out the elements, and Mrs McDonald looked around. Nature had largely reclaimed the inside of the building. Coarse grass grew up between the cracks in the old floor and straggly plants had colonised various nooks and crannies in the stone walls.

"'To the left of the fireplace,' he said. That's where she was taken from."

"Suppose he was lying," I offered.

"They don't lie. That's another law. Trickery is their way, not outright lying."

She put the gold ring on the floor to the left of the chimney breast and walked out again.

"Now we must wait," she said.

She reached into the carrier bag that she had brought with her and took out a woollen blanket which she laid over her arm. Then she faced the doorway and stood still.

We stood in the gathering gloom of a miserable, cold twilight for ten or fifteen minutes and I noticed that the old lady was wringing her hands with anxiety. Occasionally she would let out an expression of frustration but she never moved from the spot in front of the door. The wind continued to moan with sullen aggression and I continued to look around the darkening heath nervously.

And then a figure appeared in the doorway. I took a sharp, involuntary breath and my eyes widened. A powerful mixture of joy, amazement and triumph rose up through my chest and settled as a painful knot of raw emotion in my throat. My passenger of the previous night stood there, naked. She had obviously been returned as she had been taken. The snowy whiteness of her skin seemed almost luminous in the gloom of the grey twilight and she stepped forward slowly.

As much as I wanted to laugh hysterically and cry at the same time, I was reminded of the need for urgent action when I saw Mrs McDonald hurry forward. I followed instinctively. The blanket was wrapped quickly around the young woman's shoulders and we helped her back to the car where I bundled her into the back seat. I had no fear of her sitting behind me this time. Mrs McDonald was getting into the other side as I slammed the door shut.

"Drive away quickly," said the old lady as I climbed into the driver's seat.

The instruction was unnecessary. I realised the necessity for speed, but also knew that I had to be careful not to put a wheel into some deep pothole and become stuck.

The mile-long drive to the main road seemed to take forever. The wind was now blowing constantly at storm force and seemed to be trying to arrest the car's progress like some invisible hand. It was almost dark and I was sure that several of the violent bumps that vibrated through the car were caused by something other than the state of the track. At one point the car rocked heavily from side to side, but I drove on and eventually reached the

welcome sight of tarmac. Once I was on its familiar modern surface, I relaxed.

The drive back to Ullapool was uneventful and no-one said anything. I felt drained almost to the point of exhaustion and it was all I could do to keep the car safely on the road and make reasonable speed. I glanced often into the rear view mirror to see the young woman cradled in Mrs McDonald's arms and crying quietly.

When we arrived back at the hotel I drove the car around to the back and parked in the private car park, close to the back door. I helped to guide the young woman up the steps and into the kitchen where the old lady sat her down on a chair and began talking to her gently in Gaelic. Then she went to the sink and returned with a glass of water, explaining to me that it would be necessary to accustom her body to physical food gradually.

I stared at the pitiful form leaning heavily on the refectory table as she sipped the water. I was struck by the contrast between the reddened rims of her eyes and the ghostly white pallor of the rest of her face. She looked up at me and said something in her native language. Her voice was weak and indistinct. I looked at Mrs McDonald.

"She says 'thank you'."

I nodded and the tears began to well in my own eyes. The old lady continued.

"You must go to bed now. You are exhausted and you will have no dreams tonight. There is a lot to do and you would only be in the way."

At first I found such a direct order insulting. I had played my part too, I thought. And I didn't want to leave the young woman. I felt strongly attached to her and concerned for her welfare. But Mrs McDonald was right. I was exhausted and there was probably nothing more that I could do.

I said goodnight and made my way through the lobby and up to my room. The climb was remarkably tiring and I couldn't be bothered to undress. I fell onto the bed and into asleep almost in the same instant.

The following morning I awoke at about seven, feeling anxious and excited. I changed my clothes quickly and went downstairs, keenly anticipating the prospect of seeing Mrs

McDonald and our newly reclaimed soul. I had so many questions. Who was she? Did she remember her name? How long ago had she been taken? Did she remember her time in the other world, and what was it like? How did she view the prospect of life back among the humans? etc., etc., etc.

Mrs Campbell was behind the desk as I came downstairs and the way she looked at me did not bode well for an affable conversation. I went over to her anyway.

"Is your mother about?" I asked with a hint of nervous hesitation.

"No, she is not," replied Mrs Campbell curtly. "But she left this for you."

She handed me a small, sealed envelope and went back to writing in the hotel bookings diary.

"Thank you," I said and made my way to the dining room.

This time I was hungry. I sat down and used a table knife to open the letter. There was one small sheet of ruled paper that had a few lines written on it in small, neat handwriting. It said:

Dear Sir

I am sorry, I never learned your name.

Brigit - for that is the name we have chosen for her - and I have gone away, and I do not know when we shall be back. We are both grateful to you, but what we have to do will be difficult and the fewer people who are involved the better.

You should continue your journey now. There is nothing more you can do. You will not see us again and I can assure you it is better that way.

Yours faithfully

Eileen McDonald.

This was horribly disappointing. All the questions, all the effort, all the risk, all the fear and excitement - all over in thirty six hours! My initial reaction was to ignore the letter and stay put until the duo made their return.

I munched a slice of toast without tasting it and then left the dining room to storm out of the hotel. My disappointment had turned to feelings of anger and frustration. I spent a desultory day

much like the previous one, making frequent visits to tedious tea shops and musing on recent events and the old lady's letter.

Eventually I realised that she was right. Assimilating Brigit into modern society would be a difficult job requiring patience, sensitivity and fine judgement. Mrs McDonald had the time, the wisdom and the woman's touch. I was a mere male with a life back home.

I returned, somewhat crestfallen, to the small hotel that had been the setting for so much excitement, so much fear and so much learning. I collected my things and went down to the lobby. There was no one about and I had the impression that Mrs Campbell would have no wish to see me off. I left a cheque for what I knew to be the charge for two night's bed and breakfast, and left.

I had no heart to continue my holiday. How could I match the events of the last two days? I drove back towards Inverness until I reached the Corrieshalloch Gorge. I hesitated for a moment, wondering whether I should continue on the Inverness road and take another look at the old croft. I decided against it. If I was to put my recent adventure behind me, it seemed better that I should start now. I turned right and took the west coast road through Torridon.

I drove for what was left of the day and broke my journey with an overnight stop at a hotel near Loch Lomond. Early the next morning I was on the road again and arrived home at lunchtime.

For the next few days I pondered the fate of the two women whom I had caused to be thrown together in such strange circumstances. I had great faith in Mrs McDonald, but the permutation of problems and possibilities seemed endless. Would she take Brigit to the police and set in motion a complex train of events that could go almost anywhere? Would she try to keep her hidden by settling her in a remote, Gaelic-speaking community somewhere? Would the locals accept a stranger coming into their midst, and could it be a practicable solution in the long term anyway?

For all my well-intentioned decision to consign the episode to history, I knew that I would always be haunted by the need to know what happened. I decided that I would drive back to Ullapool in a month or two's time to find out. Mrs McDonald would probably object, but I felt I had certain rights in the matter.

And then, in the evening of the third or fourth day, I was flicking through the Teletext news pages when my eye was caught by a headline that read:

BODIES FOUND IN MISSING PERSON HUNT.

Such headlines are common enough on Teletext, but I felt a sense of understandable foreboding about this one. I dialled the page and read:

BODIES FOUND IN HIGHLAND SEARCH

Police in northern Scotland, searching for an elderly woman reported missing from Ullapool recently, have confirmed that the bodies of two women have been found at the foot of nearby Corrieshalloch Gorge.

One of the bodies is thought to be that of the missing woman. The identity of the second body, that of a young woman in her late teens, remains a mystery. Next of kin have yet to be informed.

I sat in shock and disbelief for a while. I tried to tell myself that the two bodies could be unconnected with the two women who had sat in the back seat of my car a few days earlier. Then I remembered Mrs McDonald's words and knew the truth of it.

"The only real point in getting her back would be so that she could die and feel all the sorrows and pains along the way."

She had obviously had the courage of her convictions and effected the only practicable solution. My sense of guilt and sadness was profound. I felt responsible for the deaths of two women. One, a dear and wise old lady who, though she probably had little time left on this earth, would still be a loss to a world losing its way. The other, a beautiful young woman still approaching her prime, who might have had a happy and fruitful life in different circumstances. No amount of logic and rational justification would take away the knot of remorse that gripped my stomach.

But my respect for the old lady's courage was uppermost. In taking what she had obviously decided was the right and proper

course, she had at least enabled the tragic young woman to re-establish her birthright and avoid the "sorrows and pains along the way." I can only hope that the sudden upsurge in mine will dwindle eventually.

J.J. Beazley
May, 2009

Having spent several decades trying unsuccessfully to write fiction, JJ Beazley was pleasantly surprised to be suddenly handed the gift in the summer of 2002. He still doesn't know where it came from, but he does know what precipitated it. It was seeing a tree shake violently and unaccountably one windless night in July, and it was hearing a low, menacing growl in a quiet country lane a few nights later. He wrote both incidents down and extended them into a short story called *More Things in Heaven and Earth*. The first draft was rough, but it was recognisably fiction in form and mode of expression. Needless to say, it has been polished a little since then and was included in the first issue of Candlelight.

Forty-one more short stories and a novella followed, and sixteen of them have now been published with a couple more waiting in the wings. Being what most people would describe as 'weird', the majority of his stories are speculative in nature.

He knows his fiction will never make him rich or famous, and neither would he expect it to. He wrote the stories that wanted to be written. Whilst it pleases him that some of them might be enjoyed, their value to a reader was never really the issue. Whether any more will ever be written remains to be seen.

He lives the life of an English peasant in a small house in the depths of rural Derbyshire. He does so alone and is presently unemployed, which means he is rather worse off financially than most English peasants. He takes comfort from the fact that poverty helps to ward off the smugness and conformist attitudes common among the wealthy.

Hobbyhorse, Hobbyhorse, Where Have You Been?

Skadi meic Beorh

Prologos

Lives filled with quotidian angst have reason for that; and oft more than not these souls lie attached to some forgotten and indecorous past seeming inescapable, yet exorable enough. But alas, the way out is almost always neglected for lack of knowledge--a disastrous problem stemming directly from the seared conscience; the socially-conditioned mind unconscious to love while, like Moses with his mendacious head-covering, proclaiming to all that love and rebirth have arrived to transform. Many *see* this declaration of the self-proclaimed saved-and-sanctified to be untrue, of course, but the Children of Darkness are, in their generation, wiser, *and louder,* than the Children of Light.

And so our chains remain, for we believe they must, or that we deserve them, or that, and God have mercy on us all for *this*,

that we shall be *redeemed* one day, but until that day we are freed from all accountability!

Untruth in the vain covering over of transgression is a deadly thing for the unfortunate descendants of the deceiver. Untold generations are affected by the sinful irresponsibility which, in its time, did not simply cause a minor disharmony easily set aright, but set in motion a dissonance so horrendous that many lives were, and are recurrently, swept up into its hidden passion... and destroyed utterly as if by some unseen mower of souls.

Quotha! Will we release ourselves from these clamoring, clinging ghosts bent wholly upon our ruin? For they burn with timeless envy, having been brought low, and this of their own reckless accord!

To proclaim single innocence in rejection of the past, and then to, at all costs, seek peace and ensue it, yet stands as both the ideal and triumph held dear by all great men and women of old. Though they be crushed into dust, their eyes and hearts are set firmly upon the source of Love, a source which will set all things aright, if only we will *acquiesce*... the most difficult act ever achieved by any soul. Yet, the paradox here—and there are *always* paradoxes—is that this victorious soul is no longer a *single* soul when finally achieving, but long before its release has found its oneness with God. And in this unique oneness lies the promised Rest; the refuge that no tyrannical voice can unsettle, that no macabre vision can shake, that no accursed ancestry can breach.

Woe to the innocents in our charge.

Ω

Cal eyed the three-wheeled hobbyhorse with reserve. He wasn't sure he liked his grandfather's gift. He wasn't even sure he liked his grandfather. He had only met him the week before, on Summer Solstice. He didn't think too much of the big loud man with the large mouth and monstrous red moustache and strange accent and hot menthol breath. He saw that his mother loved this man, but she called him *Daddy*, and this made Cal feel nervous.

He walked across the polished pine floor of the playroom, maneuvering around his electric train that at times would chase him,

stepping over his little sister's Baby Boo doll whom she loved as if it was really alive, kicking aside one of his silver cowboy guns... *shrewww!* and hopping over a plush kangaroo. He came to a wavering stop five feet from the strongly-built wooden horse, its delicate mouth open as if breathing on the run, its pretty black eyes intent on an unguessable purpose. He remembered his mother's favorite words to a popular song:

Love rides hard, and through the night,
holding healing for your fright
and knowing you are near...

She had told him that after Solstice, the Sun would begin going down earlier and earlier, but he had learned to tell time, and he was confused because it was already 9:25 and why was the Sun still shining?... or was that...

"Why are you still up, young man?"

Mommy sounded concerned, but not angry. She never got cross. That was how *daddy* had acted. But he was gone now.

"I just wanted to... look at my horse Lopez Methuselah."

"Oh, Cal! *What* have you named him?"

"Mopez Lepthuselah... um, I mean..."

"That's a *wonderful* name! *Lopez Methuselah*! Oh, Granddaddy will be so *proud* when he hears that. You're so *bright*, Cal. I'm so glad you're mine."

"I love you too, mommy," Cal said as he hugged his mother--not sure, though, that he liked to belong to *anyone*.

"Cal? Can we talk to your horse Mr. Lopez Methuselah tomorrow? It's late, and mommy needs to get some sleep. Your grandfather will be leaving tomorrow, and I want you to be up and awake enough to say goodbye. He loves you very much, you know. He's going back to Ireland, but wants us to visit later this Summer... maybe in August. Would you like that? Would you like to see the old castle your grandpapa owns? Would you like to see where the Ruddy Branch warriors rode their horses, and saved pretty damsels in distress from fire-breathing dragons, and..."

Cal was understanding about half of what his mother was saying. He had become sleepy, but was also wont to daydream. Six months before, his mother had him checked for autism, but the

tests had proven negative. She had been relieved, and Cal had been happy not to visit that old scary sea-green hospital anymore with all the men rolling around in wicker wheelchairs, some with bloody bandages wrapped around their heads, others missing arms and legs and eyes... all smiling at him and his baby sister Veronica as they had toddled along side by side.

Ω

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse,
where have you been?

I've been up to London
and o'er to the fen.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
where go you now?

I race back to Dover
to tend to my cow.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
where after that?

I'll travel round Scotland
to buy me a hat.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
what of the war?

The boys are all dead now;
what was the fight for?

"Cal, me lad! Top o' the *mornin'* to ye! Top o' the goddamned mornin'!"

Cal, interrupted in his song, was swept up like a leaf in a gale, his legs swinging as he shot high in his grandfather's massive arms.

"An' I'll say *again* yer a heavy one, boyo! Ye'll be a gentleman farmer as I, ye will. An' *that* begins with loads o' hard work! *Good* work, but *hard* work ne'ertheless."

What was this giant-mouthed peppermint man talking about? Cal would not leave his mother and sister for anything in the world. His grandfather must be crazy. That was it. He was a crazy man like on TV.

"Cal?"

His mother.

"Cal? Come here for a second, darling," and as she said this she lifted him away from the big man. "We have something to ask you."

"What, mommy?" Cal felt scared. "What?" He shot a vicious glance up at his grandfather, who thrilled to the child's natural *fiántas;* his Irish ferocity. The aged shepherd was unable to hold back a good-natured grin. At that expression Cal's own went feral. The man's smile broadened.

"Remember last night when I told you grandfather would like us to visit in Ireland for a little while? *Mommy's* old home, where I grew up?"

"Yes, mommy," Cal replied, unsure. "I *think* I 'member..."

Cal watched the big Viking's smile fade. He remembered the tedious tests for autism he has gone through, and winced.

"Well, Cal..." his mother continued. "Let's sit down."

She motioned to her gregarious father to come down from his royal perch and nest the child in warmly, make him feel more comfortable. The old warrior sat on the sofa, swallowing Cal in his hot shadow.

"Cal, your grandfather and I would like... well, we would like to know if you'd consider *moving* to Ireland?"

"*But mommy*?"

Cal felt hot tears explode into his eyes as he searched his mother's face. His shoulders began to shake and bend forward beneath his fear. He didn't care for this feeling of helplessness.

"Oh, *no*, Cal! Oh, *no*, my baby. Oh, come here. Oh, I'm so sorry! *No*, darling. *No*! I wouldn't make you go by *yourself!* Oh, *hush* now. Hush! *Shhhhhhh*... Hush now. I'll be going too. Oh, I'll be going *too. And* baby Veronica. *And* baby."

Cal's tears had sprung from an eternal well, for though he seemed to hear his mother, he wept like an infant needing more love than anyone could possibly give him.

"Why baby cry?" Veronica asked as she teetered over and held out a half-eaten oatmeal cookie for her big brother.

Ω

Much later that night...

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse,
where will you go?

I'll ride into Ireland
and over the snow.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
where will you stay?

I'll sleep in a castle
and wait Judgment Day.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
where after that?

I'll go to the Devil
to steal back my hat.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
what do you see?

Ghosts from a roundtower
coming for me!

Cal stood in the gloom of the playroom, frightened at his made-up song, yet comforted in the delirium created by that fright; that dark; that cold, cold dark.

He sang it again. And *again*, never missing a word, never failing the music.

His mother heard him singing in her sleep, mused with a happy smile, turned over and slipped into a ghoulish nightmare of American proportions that got her out of bed and headed her into the kitchen for a cup of hazelnut yogurt.

Cal knew his mother had arisen. He stood silent, touching his hobbyhorse, not astride him yet, but touching Lopez Methuselah and feeling the warmth from his hand permeate the sturdy wooden animal, give him life, awaken him from his toyland slumber.

Cal swung his leg over and found the saddle comfortable. He picked up the reins, slapping them. *Giddy-up*!

Midnight...

and the wheels of his horse squeaked, and rolled. Forward. More. *More*... and Cal could smell a new air, a fresh breath of wind scented with pine and clean like Christmas.

"Mama?" he heard his baby sister call as if from a dream, and then that low, sweet voice carrying the somnolent answer.

"Go back to sleep, sweet *cailín* mine..."

a cool breeze picked up...

and at that moment Cal knew, with a strange knowing that flipped in the pit of his tiny stomach, that he was no longer in Lewes, Delaware... that he was now somewhere older, darker, more exhilarating...

lost...

"Take me fingers, child," an elderly woman dressed in rustling black commanded as she looked down at Cal with very kind, very blue eyes. "Park yer horse here an' take me fingers, kind sir, if ye will."

Cal dismounted Lopez Methuselah, took the nice lady's warm hand and walked with her toward a lush garden moonlit and filled with singing nightbirds and roses. He felt safe with this tall woman. He felt...

"Cal? Oh, sweet darling! You're out of bed again..."

"Mommy? This nice lady..."

But the lady was gone, and Cal was back, swimming in the gloam of the large room cluttered with shadowy toys and games.

He turned to see his mother's gray silhouette, and ran to her. She held him, his little face pressed hard against her comforting thigh.

"Mommy? Can I..."

"Yes, of course my baby."

Cal walked Lopez Methuselah out of toyland, through the music room and then into the open hallway of bedrooms bordered by an ornate teakwood balustrade overlooking the frontroom downstairs. Cal's bedroom was at the far end of the hall, just past the landing at the head of the stairs. He had asked for this room the very day they had moved into the old house; his mother wondering why, but never asking.

Cal lay restive, once sitting up in bed like a stiffened marionette and crying out into the hollow silence of a spacious room done in harlequin acrobat décor. He had seen *them*. His scream brought his mother running, but when she got to him, he had lain back down, rigid and cold, his eyes staring straight ahead.

"Come get in the bed with me, Cal. Come on, now. Come on, darling."

"What about Lopez?"

"Bring him."

Cal crept back later when he knew his mother had fallen again to sleep. As he walked by Veronica's nursery, he parked his hobbyhorse and went in to make sure she was alright in her crib. He checked to see that no covers were smothering her; that her tiny neck was comfortable; that her pacifier was in her mouth. Satisfied, he braved himself for the thick blackness of his bedroom, illuminated only by the plug-in nightlight with the leering harlequin clown head.

Night came again, and Cal stole out of bed at half past nine, going to Lopez Methuselah, thrilled. Maybe he would see the lady in black again. Maybe she would take him inside the old castle he had seen next to the garden. Maybe he would see a *real knight*. Maybe, maybe...

As he padded through the music room with its grand piano and its Irish harp so loved by his mother, he sensed something wrong; something dreadful. He stopped seven feet from the playroom threshold. It wasn't a noise, or a current of air. No. But someone, or something, was in the other room. He crept forward...

Cal sat up in bed, stunned, gazing about the dusky room, not knowing where he was. His eyes focused... *They* were there again. The three pale men, long-faced with menacing winky pig eyes and

wrinkled black slits for mouths, each a head taller than the other, staring down at him through his cracked bedroom door. He screamed. He knew they had come for his mother. He knew they had stopped at this first room to look in on him, the protector of the family, and had made a dire mistake in doing so. They had not sensed that he was able to see into several worlds at once; that he was at every moment sensitive to *all* worlds.

"What's *wrong*, my darling! What's the *matter!*"

His mother was there, suddenly and very assuring, like an angel. *Just a nightmare,* she was whispering in his fevered ear over and over. *Just a nightmare, my sweetheart...* and he wanted to believe her.

Ω

"We'll be leaving in a week, Cal."

"Weaving," Veronica said. "Weaving! *Ha-ha!*" She clapped her hands. "Weaving!"

"Just one *week*, mommy? Why just one *week?* I don't *want* to leave in just one week..."

"Wonweek!" Veronica said. "Wonweek! *Ha!*"

"*Why* mommy?" Cal said, feeling agitated.

"Because..."

She paused, not having expected so much resistance. A wave of despair wafted over her, but she held her fear in check; knew enough not to let it pour over her children in anger or frustration or uncontrolled tears. "Because, my little man," she replied as she took a deep breath, "your grandfather has a *surprise* for us, and we can't be *late* for it. Isn't that exciting?"

Cal knew his mother had made this up, that there was no real surprise, but he loved her still. He knew she was trying to hold on; trying not to cry about daddy. They would never see his daddy again.

"Yes, mommy. That sounds fun..."--but his voice trailed off as his thoughts returned to his new friend. He left his mother and sister in the living room and wandered upstairs and into a capacious *djang* illumined with brilliant golden showers of sunlit dust.

Ω

10:45 pm.

Cal could hear himself breathing. He was frightened of the three long-faced men. Maybe they would be in the toy room, *outside* his dreaming this time. He counted his steps through the music room. One, two, three, four... ten, 'leven, t'elve...

halfway there...

something squeaked, like a rocker, no... like a...

Reeeeee! Reeeeee-reeeeee!

It stopped. Cal was at the threshold now, his heart driving like a hummingbird. Would the men look around the doorframe? He waited, his eyes wide with terrible expectation. His breath felt like ice, and then fire... Where *were* they? He stepped closer. He peered into the room lit by clouded moonbeams.

No men. He sighed and felt himself smile.

But... *no*!

Lopez Methuselah was parked in a different place than where he had been left! Cal started, and stepped back.

"Why are you there?" he heard himself whisper, and no sooner did the softened words escape his lips than the hobbyhorse began rolling... again. Toward Cal.

Reeeeee-reeeeee! Reeeeee-reeeeee! Reeeeee-reeeeee!

Cal froze, horror-struck. He had no time to reason. He raced toward the frightful toy and embraced its thick neck, burying his face in its flaxen mane. Lopez Methuselah stopped moving, enjoying the attention of the terrified child. Cal felt a scream rise, but muffled it, knowing his mother would come running, and see that he was scared of something, *maybe his horse*... and she might take Lopez away and never give him back. He *liked* Lopez Methuselah. He still wasn't sure about the giant man he was told to call *grandfather,* or about moving away to a strange place, even if it *did* have castles and knights. But he loved his strong, fierce horse that could take him away...

"Where we goin' tonight, horse?"

Cal thought he heard neighing, and a snort. Nearly crying out, he mounted the well-made toy, slid his feet into comfortable stirrups, took the reins, wrapped his arms around the horse's neck, buried his face in the good-smelling mane, and closed his eyes...

Ω

At first it looked like a wisp of smoke to Cal; a cloud maybe, like the kind on summery, summery days. As he glanced around, the room grew lighter, and he thought he might be inside the castle roundtower he had seen the night he had first traveled. He patted his horse's head, rubbed his ears.

The place was a large hall built of gray stones and hung with embroidered tapestries and blazing shields of heraldry which, at a certain angle, hurt Cal's eyes. As he looked around in wonder, he recognized the Fitzgerald shield; his clan. His mother had one hanging in the parlor. She had explained the depiction to him as best she could, but he knew there must be more to tell, and he *wanted* to know.

"Master Fitzgerald. *Oh*! How oft must I ask ye, kind sir, not to ride thy tarpan into the lord's house? Mr. Methuselah, I feel certain, would be quite happy in his stable. Oh, ye'll be the life o' me, ye will, ye will..."

It was the kind lady who had taken him into the garden. He turned. The wisp of smoke had altered into an amorphous column of white mist now floating but a few yards away from Cal and his mount. As he watched it hang in midair, it took on the shape of a girl dressed all in white. Cal went cold, though, as he saw that the irises of her eyes were as bleached as the drifts of cloud still surrounding her head. Then from a corner of the room a voice spoke in a mournful tone:

"*I... am... the Ghost Girl... of Strabane...*"

Cal shrieked as the apparition glided toward him in a ghastly dance, holding out her arms as if to embrace, or suffocate. He half alighted from his horse, and half held onto Lopez for dear life--shaking, chilled, and alarmed.

The girl began to weep, at first sounding only like someone sobbing, but as she neared Cal, her sob turned to a wail, and then to a bloodcurdling keen that bristled every hair on his body.

She hung suspended over Cal now, her arms held out as if trying to cuddle him, and him looking up, his eyes filling with tears of terror, his hands ripping at the reins, his fingernails clawing at his horse's polished wooden face. Lopez Methuselah neighed in pain, and began to roll backwards... fast, *faster*...

The girl moaned and followed them, flying through the cold air of the room.

"I..." she sang through her lament, "I... please, *please*... Oh, please! Please, *no*!"

Her arms flailed once, twice--her hands then ringing piscean as she fell into an even deeper travail. Beyond horror now, Cal was spellbound by the deathly picture before him. As he looked at the girl, sitting bolt upright in his saddle, his feet pushing forward in the stirrups, there came a lurid addition to the disturbing scene. Cal watched in shock as a longsword materialized and impaled the girl through her abdomen.

"*No!*" she cried out. "*Oh! Aaa!*"

Her alabaster hands clasped the weapon's gilded hilt as a great laceration formed from her sternum to her navel, making a sickening ripping sound. She crumpled to her knees. At that moment her gown turned a livid crimson. Soon a steaming pool blackened the cold stone floor. The hobbyhorse snorted and rolled back, splattering his and his rider's face with warm blood. Cal cringed and turned his eyes away, but only for a second, for he was drawn back to the horrific vision, as if someone turned his head against his will.

"Fitzgerald!" the girl cried out, and then quoth she:

Ollathir Fitzgerald of auld Emain Rí!
Ye've slain now thy sister in murdering me!
Yet vengeance be God's and the Devil's Sprite Three!
A pox on thine house, on thy line, and on thee!

Ω

"Cal! Cal, baby? Cal? *Cal!*"

But Cal was unconscious, a ragdoll in his panicky mother's arms, his cheeks shiny with tears, his only sound a slight whimpering, as if he were hurt. She checked him over. Nothing. Dr. Lorch came immediately, one of the few local physicians to yet value the house call.

"He's been terribly frightened, Mrs. Colson."

John Lorch possessed a soft tone which restored confidence in even his most dejected patients.

"It's... ah... *Fitzgerald*... again."

"I'm sorry. My apologies... Miss... *Fitzgerald*." The physician cleared his throat. "Divorce, may I ask?"

"Yes. He waived all rights. He hated the children. Jealous of them."

"I'm so sorry."

"Me too."

"Cal... will be fine. Please be assured of this. I've given him valerian root extract--a natural sedative... for his nerves. But..."

"But what?...

That silent look of searching--of mentally trying out several possible answers.

"*But what*?... *Dr. Lorch*?"

"Please. Don't alarm yourself any further. Cal's..."

"Doctor?"

"It's... *god*... it's just the look in his eyes, Maggie... he's *seen* something that... I'll just say that... I feel certain that it's not something *I'd* ever want to see. Or *experience,* I guess I mean. Your family, Maggie! *My God*! You're... all in my prayers..."

"What do you *mean*, John! What are you *saying*? *You're frightening me*!"

"For *you*, Maggie..." The kindly old man shook his head, smiled at the young woman, handed her a bottle containing two yellow pills, and left without another word.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
where were you born?

Not far from Strabane Town
near yon River Mourne.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
what have you seen?

A sight now too horrid
for me to explain.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
will you return?

Candlelight

I ride back tomorrow
unless the town burn.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse
why would it flame?

That slayer Fitzgerald,
but 'twas not his name.

Hobbyhorse, hobbyhorse,
who followeth thee?

The ghost of Strabane
and the Devil's Sprite Three...

Skadi meic Beorh
May, 2009

Skadi meic Beorh is a writer/editor abiding in the East End of PGH. His novel of satirical fantasy, *To Be Saved From Witches,* will be published by Cosmos Books in Oct. 2009. Much more about this author can be found at **skadimeicbeorh.wordpress.com**

Lapse

Darren Davies

The sun hung full and low in the sky as he urged the car out through the gates of the construction site and onto the road leading away. An early start had brought a long day, and regardless of his intentions, a late enough finish. Yet the prospect of heading home did not bring the feeling of release it should have done.

The deepening colours of early summer twilight washed over the road and the massed ranks of trees on either side as it wound around the side of the hill. The site was isolated in the extreme, a solitary exclamation of civilization in a seldom-touched corner. Assembly grants and promises of local employment had presumably played their roles in determining its location, but he found the drive wearying, though he was a bare month into the job.

There would be no release once he arrived home, either. The prospect of facing the Inquisition, while nothing new, did nothing to alleviate his spirits. Still, he could make a bad thing a little better if he took the short cut across the hills that one of the welders, a local, had told him about.

It was one of those quiet evenings where the promise of summer had not yet been made reality, but where the fragile heat of the day was still held in the air. He saw the road divide and branch off to the right up ahead, and as he came closer and made his turn, he could see that while it wasn't exactly a dirt track, it was narrow enough so that two cars passing each other would squeak as they did so. Half an hour saved by trying the new route rather than heading down to the coast and then along the main road. It might even help mitigate the suspicious stares and stave off another discussion about the long hours he was away from the house. He had explained the demands of his new, highly pressurized job so often, and to so little effect, that he had begun to doubt his own reasoning. His wife saw the time away as indications of something else. The ragged sigh of the put upon escaped him.

But that was an hour away, provided he didn't get lost, which in a new area was always a possibility. Still, there would be benefits in the long run. The radio was on, the wind slipping in through the open window was warm, and the satisfaction of having not fallen flat on his face during the day lay around him like a blanket. He glanced at the phone lying in its cradle and pressed the speed dial for home, as he did each day when he left.

"Hello, you only leaving now?"

His wife's voice crackled through the loudspeaker and filled the interior of the car.

"Hello, yeah, couldn't get away earlier," he said, hating the anxious way he said it. No wonder suspicions bounced around her head like so many loose tennis balls. The silence stretched out.

"You making dinner tonight?"

The words were broken and interrupted, but he knew what the question was even before she had asked it.

"Yeah, yeah, what's another mountain to Atlas?" This last was said beneath his breath, but still the sign of rebellion was heard.

"What was…?"

The signal was gone. Thankfully. He turned to the scenery for respite. In the distance he could see the hazy shapes of mountains, and closer, draped in forest that was in parts virgin and in others plantation, the hills, marching in line with the coast some thirty or forty miles distant. Already there were more shades of green in the gently moving branches than he knew existed. It was

peaceful, with not another soul on the road, and despite the crackle of the radio turning from news to gibberish as that signal also failed, he tried to wind down.

If he were honest with himself, there were still uncertainties; over the job; the decision to move to a place so far away and unfamiliar; and over the additional stress it was imposing on his already pressurized home life. It was early days yet, but all the same, he would have expected things to have at least shown signs of clicking into place by now.

"Don't think about it." He said into the air, "This is the only time you get to yourself. Just chill the hell out."

Yet with the radio a mix of crackles and hisses and with an unchanging view, it required effort not to think about it. Instead he concentrated on the welder's instructions:

"It's not a great road, that one. Twists and turns a bit, like. There's a village on the road, maybe half an hour away, but I wouldn't stop if I were yew. Not with yewer accent. People up there still think Glyndŵr is gonna return and throw off the Saxon yoke."

He glanced at the clock in the dashboard. The village, probably with a name that could only be pronounced with a bucket full of flem, would be right around the next corner. The road seemed as averse to straight lines as he had been promised, turning one way and then another, following the lines of the hills. Always the forest on either side. From time to time he caught glimpses of the sun, still as low as it had been when he had driven away from the plant. It had changed colour without him realizing, becoming shaded like a bruise. The breeze became a whisper, then dropped and died, though the air grew no colder as he drove. The car rumbled on over the pitted tarmac, and but for the feel of the engine, he would have thought that time had stopped, such was the stillness.

The road had no branches beyond a few animal tracks that skirted the edges of the tree line. The forest appeared without end. No wind, no sound, no signal for the mobile phone or the radio. No village, either. He had been driving for forty minutes, and still there was no sign of human habitation. He was becoming, if he were honest, a little spooked by the silence.

On a whim, he slowed the car down, and after waiting until there was a relatively straight stretch of road, indicated and pulled

over. He wasn't sure whey he was being so careful, as not a soul had passed him since he had left the site, but since taking the big step with the new job, he had become more conservative in other ways. The thought raised a fleeting smile.

He turned the key and the engine died. Hesitating as his fingers curled around the door handle; he felt a sheen on his palm that had not been there previously. Annoyed at himself, he opened the door and stepped out.

Silence greeted him. There was no rustle of leaves and branches, no bird calls, nothing. He turned around, wondering whether his tiredness was affecting him. Walking around the car, the crunch of broken tarmac at the edge of the road brought less comfort, not more. It sounded muted, as if were afraid to break the stillness. No sound at all. He stepped off the road and covered the few steps to the line of foliage. The branches hung like wet washing, lifeless and borne down by their own weight. He frowned at the trees: pines, he thought. Bathed in the strange, purplish light from the sun, their shadows seemed deeper than he had though they would be. He turned around slowly, suddenly wary of places where he could not see. Moving back around the car, he told himself that the pace he walked at wasn't at all rushed, despite the knot in his belly urging swiftness.

He turned the key in the ignition hurriedly, thumbed the button to raise the electric window, and activated the internal locking mechanism. He wondered exactly why he was checking the space behind the driver's seat even as he did it. Feeling a little safer, even if a little ridiculous, he glanced in the rearview mirror, indicated, and drove off.

The road again, full of snakelike bends that seemed to lead nowhere. Even the tracks branching off into the forest had given up. It was just him, the car and the road, all together beneath a beaten-up sky. He drove quickly, managing the turns with an urgent need to break from the cover of the forest.

A glance at the dashboard told him he had been driving for close on an hour, though he found it difficult to be sure. His memory had become hazy of late, full of missed details and small, but at the same time noticeable, gaps. But there had been no village, he was sure, and there seemed to be no end to the road. He must have taken the wrong one, surely? Or maybe the welder was one of

those locals that professed to chaff beneath the weight of foreign oppression. But if it had been the wrong one that he had taken, then which one was he on? The furtive look at the dashboard had raised another concern. The petrol indicator hovered near the reserve. This in itself would not normally have been a problem, as once he hit the coast road there were enough garages to fuel an invading army. But up here, quite possibly lost and with not even mobile phone coverage, the problems were multiplied.

As if on cue, even as he was telling himself to avoid courting trouble, the styilised petrol pump flashed on the dashboard. The sudden change was startling, and again he stopped the car. No indicator, no checking in the mirror (after all, what was the point in this strange twilight place where nothing changed and no sound reached his ears?) There was a map in the glovebox, and he tugged it out from underneath the CD cases that had lived there since before the move. Even as he unfolded the map, he was glancing around, spooked by nothing in particular and everything at once.

The map wasn't particularly up to date, but he had reasoned at the time that, barring the building going on at the new site, nothing else would have changed in this godforsaken place in the last hundred years, let alone the last five. He tracked the roads, recognizing places by the form of their strange names full of double l's and multiple vowels. His finger traced the road he thought he had taken while his other hand toyed nervously at his lip.

The noise, when it came, might as well have been a gunshot going off next to the window. A solitary hooting sound came out of the forest to his right. He caught the panicked look in the rearview mirror as his head swung around trying to locate the source. Somewhere inside his head, a small voice cheered at the knowledge that he wasn't entirely alone, but it was swiftly silenced by a chorus of other voices wondering exactly what it was that had made the noise. It had to be a deer or, more likely, a stag. Some sort of mating call, his rational mind told him. There were no wolves in the country, and though there had been talk of reintroducing some into the highlands of Scotland, this was, in comparison, a place with more civilization.

'Not that you'd know it to look,' he muttered.

The sound of his own voice gave him no confidence. It sounded strange to his ears, as if he were hearing it for the first time. He wiped the palms of his hands on his jeans, at once ignoring and acknowledging the sweat that lined them.

Again the sound came, mournful and echoing. Again it faded out, though in the still air he thought he could hear the almost imperceptible sound of undergrowth moving. The map dropped, forgotten, into the footwell. The sound had been closer that time, his ears pinpointing it as coming from the right and a little up the road. He felt vulnerable; only the car door separated him from the outside world and whatever it might be, out there.

It was a stag. Had to be. To think otherwise would be to face the reality of the silent drive and the lack of wind and the diseased, purple sun in the sky. It would be to acknowledge that things were somehow wrong, and that in the time between him leaving the site and hearing the sound, something in the world, or something in his perception of it, had changed.

The noise came again, almost unbearably close and loud for his frayed nerves. Up ahead, he thought he caught movement as something moved through the trees close to the road.

His mind must have slipped, through stress and pressure and a thousand other little things that had been building up. Truth was, he wasn't sure what being unbalanced would feel like. Maybe this was it, and maybe there was no sound at all, except in his head.

It was drawing nearer, the creature at the tree line. In his mind, it had become exactly that. A creature, unnamed and unknown. He could not see it, but there was a shadow, large and black and real.

If he had begun to lose his grip, he had to bring reality back, before it became any worse. He had to step out of the car and see what it was in the forest. He would see that it was a stag, and then he would get back into the car, turn it around and head back. He would likely have enough petrol to get to a garage, and then he would go home, face whatever accusations lay for him there and get some sleep. In the morning, he would know he was of sound and sane mind, and life would carry on. The sun would set tonight, fading to burning red, and would rise tomorrow the colour it always had been. He would pass trees and hear the rustle of wind in their

branches and the call of birdsong, and whatever this little incident was, it would eventually fade away.

Nearly opposite the car now, the shadow slowed. It was waiting for him.

He flinched despite himself when the hooting sound came again; lower than before, yet to his mind more animalistic, more primal. He flinched again when the central locking clicked open as his sweaty fingers pulled at the handle. This was about making sure he was sane, though somewhere inside, the lone voice that had cheered at the first sound of the animal was silent. All else was silent too, waiting. It was nothing; it would be nothing. He pulled the handle and got out. No wind, no noise, just the stillness of a world suddenly dead. If this was reality, it was different to what it had been earlier. The sound came then, something that he could not have attributed to anything he had known before. His mind scrambled for answers, for recognition or acknowledgement and came up with nothing. He walked into the forest.

Darren Davies
May, 2009

Darren Davies was born and raised in north Wales. He was educated in Wales and England before travelling the world and settling in Ireland, where he is a full time engineer and part-time writer, an equation he hopes eventually to reverse.

He is currently working on a multitude of short stories and a novel, (which may yet see the light of day some time before his retirement) as well as what he is actually paid to do.

Candlelight is his second published story.

The Stolen Valuables

Simon Searle

The gilded carriage bounced on its hinges as the lord, Robert Starkey, jumped out from the well-stuffed interior. He landed as lithely as a man of his years could, gravel crunching under his booted feet. Calling his gratitude for the driver's speed, Robert clenched his wool travelling cloak around his chest and stared at his ancestral home. London and the king kept him out of Devon more than he could like. The reason for his return, the robbery, weighed heavy in his mind. One way or another, he vowed to find the answers.

Corners and cornices, obscured by the mist that the sun would burn off in a few hours, were drawn in clearly by his imagination. He knew well the gargoyles lurking over the south wing, the blank concave holes that, before the Glorious Revolution, had housed Catholic statuary. In his mind, he still saw those robed figures; as a young boy, he had watched a then dark-haired Morris

and a team of workmen pluck them out and cast them down. Robert's mind roved to the iron-banded doors as his legs carried him along the path. He rubbed his hands, warding off the cold and preparing to feel the touch of home.

It was not until he reached the doors and found them locked and barred, impenetrable, that he realised something was wrong. The stately house was silent, slumbering behind its shutters. Not even the servants were about. Morris was a highly efficient, punctual man and had been since Robert's childhood. It was certainly unusual, as far as Robert could remember, for the diligent butler not to be about at this time of the morning.

"Robert?" The whisper was coming from the other side of the door. There was some familiar quality about the voice, though Robert could not say what. He pressed his ear against the wood. "Robert?"

As though burned, Robert recoiled from the door. God! How could he have been away so long as to not recognise his own wife?

"Robert? Is that you?" The whisper was quieter this time, more fearful.

Staring at the freezing mist pooling around his boots, Robert whispered back, "Yes, Maria, it's me."

The door opened slowly, just far enough for Robert to slip inside. His wife stood on the other side, her hair loose and undressed. Her maid stood to one side, a thick candle and brass holder in one hand. The light gave Maria's pale skin an ethereal glow bordering on angelic. Heart hammering mercilessly, Robert embraced his wife.

"Even though you're home early, ten weeks is still too long," she whispered.

"I missed you."

Her fingernails pinched his skin. "I have missed you also. And I have something to tell you."

It seemed that this was some signal, pre-arranged between the women. The maid left the candle on the flagstones in a corner and disappeared silently towards the servants' bedrooms in the bowels of the house. Nervous, Robert pushed the door shut. It gave with far greater ease than he had expected, slamming home and rattling the windows.

"Damn!" He took a deep breath. "I'll have the whole house up." Latent guilt prevented him from wondering why most of the staff were not already awake.

Maria laughed softly, wind weaving through the trees. "It was not so loud as to reach the attic, Robert." She squeezed his hand. "Morris will sleep through the noise, I assure you, and he's ordered all the others, including the kitchen staff, to the top of the house since the robbery."

"I do not think that the sleeping patterns of our staff were what you meant to tell me."

"No." They were whispering. In the cavernous, shadowy hallway, with the extravagant sweep of staircase behind them and the building silent, it seemed the right thing to do. "Robert, in the time you've been away…"

…unasked, bone-chilling thoughts of infidelity and betrayal flooded his mind…

"…I have had several visits from the doctor." She was looking at him, her face open and smiling. "He came three times, and he is certain. I am pregnant, Robert."

… Would it be a servant? Some minor lord closer to her own age, who spent less time in London?…

"Did you hear me, Robert?" Her fingers brushed his cheek, unshaven in the three days since leaving the king's court, and finally Robert heard what his wife was saying.

"With child?" he muttered, his tongue tripping over the unfamiliar words. Four decades of marriage to three different women, and not one of them had said those words. "Oh, Maria." The guilt-ridden, trepidation-laden hammering of his heart ceased, replaced by a swelling that clogged his throat and forced tears onto his cheeks.

"I know," she replied, burying her face in his chest. "I know."

Stroking his wife's hair, Robert held her tightly, eyes shut. He would be a father at last! To hell with whatever thievery business Morris had called him home for. This was far more important.

"My Lord?" The butler coughed politely from a corner of the antechamber.

"I am going to take a bath now," Maria told Robert a moment later. "Would you care to eat breakfast with me in an hour?" Robert nodded and his wife reached up to kiss his cheek. "Be kind to Morris," she whispered. "He has taken this robbery and the damages most personally." She slipped quietly away from his arms and up the stairs.

Behind Robert, the butler gave another very quiet, polite cough. He turned to find Morris with the familiar huge bundle of keys hanging from his belt and his creviced face marred by a yellowing green bruise that covered one cheek and disappeared beneath what was left of his hair.

"Morris!" Robert rushed towards him and clasped the old retainer's hand. "By God, your face looks dreadful."

"I am relieved to say that yours does not, sir," Morris replied dryly, pulling backwards a little. Robert pulled his hand away, feeling somehow scalded. It swung helplessly by his side, suddenly uncertain of its place. "You look to be in excellent health, and if I might say as much, it is good to see you back in the house."

Robert's eyes flickered towards the stairs where he had last seen his wife. "It feels good to be here." His voice was vague, his attention divided.

With a age-stiffened but still proud walk, Morris led away from the antechamber and down the corridor. "Are you headed for the pantry, Morris?" Robert asked.

"Indeed, sir." Morris did not stop walking or even turn around, but Robert caught up to him swiftly with his longer, younger stride. He walked half a pace behind the butler, following him through the house. "I will show you the damage that has been done."

As they passed by the butler's sleeping quarters, Robert glanced inside. The man himself appeared a little dishevelled, perhaps as though his hands could no longer dress him as neatly as they once had, even as recently as three months ago. His shoes shone, but perhaps there was a boy to do that for him. The room was neat, or seemed so from Robert's fleeting glance. The blankets were not rumpled, the fading Celtic-patterned rug lay square to the corners and all the furniture sat in time-honoured dents. Robert felt it was the same room he had played in as a small boy, laughing and tugging the butler's sleeve for a honey sweet or a story.

"This is it, sir."

Morris pointed to what was left of the door to the butler's pantry. All the debris was long since swept away but the half of the door closest to the hinges was still damaged, dangling from the top fixing.

"So whoever it was smashed their way through the lock?"

"We believe so, sir. They would have needed some way to get through the door."

"Yes, of course." Robert nodded, running his fingers along the splintered edges. He crouched down to examine the bottom hinge. It was hanging away from the frame, nails bent where they had been pulled out. "Whoever smashed this did quite a vigorous job. Looks like they had fun," he added with a deviant grin. He had not felt this energetic in many years.

"It was the noise of them breaking through here that woke me, my Lord." Robert glanced at the butler; he was wringing his hands and evidently suffering some anguish. "I had hoped that the joiner and the locksmith would be here before your return, my lord. I was hoping you would not see this. You came home earlier than I was expecting, you see, and the joiner is not due until later."

Robert smiled fondly at the butler, a constant fixture of his life. The man had kept his objections silent when Robert rode off to war, but somehow he believed that a broken door would offend his lordship's sensibilities.

"Not to worry, Morris." Comforting the butler did not come easily to Robert; it had always been the other way around, from scraped knees to barren marriages. Besides, Robert did not have even half of the butler's eloquence. Hurriedly pointing at another door further down the corridor, Robert asked, "And is that where the Tarwell boy slept?" He already knew the answer.

"Yes, my Lord." The door rose only a few feet off the floor, more of a cupboard than a bedroom. "I suppose he must have gotten his fancy of robbing you from sleeping for so long next to the silver."

Robert agreed with the assessment. He'd never met the boy – Morris had hired him from a family in Axminster only days before Robert's most recent trip to the capital – but it made sense.

Looking inside the storage room, Robert asked, "How much was taken?" The room itself appeared untouched. The floor

was freshly swept, the crates of silver stacked three high against the back wall.

"Most of the dinner service is gone, my Lord." That was in smaller, polished wooden boxes that were piled atop the crates. Robert did not know how many there should be, but there seemed to be more than enough. When did this house ever contain the hundreds of people they apparently kept fine cutlery for? And how much did it really matter now? "We kept the canteens, just in case, but I believe it a vain hope."

"No matter." Robert shrugged. "What of the crates?"

Morris paused a moment before answering. "They are still as full as they were when you left. I believe my arrival must have deterred the thieves from any further action."

Leaving the room, Robert remarked, "A timely arrival, then. You should be congratulated." Morris did not reply. Robert had only said it to try and cheer his butler up. They would not be the last family to be robbed and besides, his unborn child was more important now. Still, if they knew who had done it, it was best they sought him out. "I trust the constables were instructed to bring him to me?" Morris nodded.

Returning to the front entrance, Robert looked out of the window again. Most of the mist had burned away; the last lay across the grounds like an old scar pointing to the ancient oak tree.

"Have some breakfast sent up for myself and my wife, would you Morris?"

"Of course, sir."

Robert turned away from the gardens and half walked, half floated up the stairs.

Ω

Night fell and Robert sat on the edge of his four-poster bed. Maria lay beside him, curled up and already close to a deep sleep.

"He really is taking this to heart, isn't he?"

Maria grunted sleepily in reply. Tugging off his boots, Robert continued, "You saw how fastidious he was about locking every door. Even the one to this room! As if we were going to thieve from ourselves."

With a heavy sigh, Maria rolled over. "He's more worried that someone will come in here while we sleep. And he's always been like that about the locks. He sleeps with the keys around his waist, or so I hear from the servants."

"Oh." Robert scratched his nose. How did Maria know more about the house than he did?

"Now will you stop worrying and come to bed?"

Robert kissed her on the cheek. "Yes, of course." He slid under the blankets next to her, one hand resting on her stomach. She smiled at him. "Sleep well."

He slept.

He woke.

The room was dark, so it must have still been night. Maria lay sleeping next to him, snoring quietly. Robert swung himself out of bed and walked over to the window. His legs felt only vaguely attached, his steps clumsy and light at the same time. The only light was coming from the moon, showing banks of fog swirling around the glass. Shadows and gloom made it look like fingers, scrabbling and tapping at the pane. With a slight shiver, he snapped the interior shutters closed, slid the bolts firmly and went back to bed.

Lying down again, he swept a strand of hair off Maria's face. It seemed some ethereal glow illuminated her, its silvery light giving her an angelic quality.

He looked over at the window. The shutters were still bolted closed. Exactly as they were when he went to bed.

And then he felt the horde of tiny pins surging up his neck, dragging the tiny hairs out. Even his skin wanted to crawl far away from whatever was watching him.

Robert closed his eyes and lay down. Nobody was watching him, and he was no lad to be scared by fancies. It was when he turned to check the door was still closed that he saw the boy. Short, thin, and dressed in oversized clothes, he could have been from any poor family. He had his eyes firmly on the carpet, expecting nothing, not daring to hope for attention.

Robert pushed his head deeper into the pillow. There was no boy. Like the misty fingers tapping at the glass, it was just a trick of the light.

"What bloody light?" he growled. His eyes snapped open. The boy was gone from in front of the fireplace. He was now

walking towards the open door, still hunched over but walking with apparent purpose.

"You're Richard Tarwell, aren't you?" Robert asked, hurriedly jamming his feet into his boots and following the boy. "How did you get back into the house? Come to help yourself to more of my silver, have you?"

The boy stood at the top of the staircase, staring down at the entryway. He gave no answer, nor even any indication that he heard the questions.

"Answer me, boy!" Robert was shouting, furious. He could feel his cheeks burning with outrage. "You *are* Richard Tarwell. Speak and be done with it!"

Robert lunged, swiping at the boy's collar. He wanted to turn him, force him to explain. Instead, his hand swept through the collar as though it really were only light.

Ω

"Robert? Robert?"

He opened his eyes slowly. Maria was leaning over him, shaking his shoulder, her soft face creased with pretty worry. She smiled as he looked blearily up at her.

"What's wrong?" he asked, suddenly becoming alert. "You look half dead with fear."

Maria sighed and straightened up. "I'm worried about you. It's long gone midday and you still in bed? I just… I thought maybe…" She bit her lip and crossed her arms defensively. "Oh, I don't know."

"I'm quite well." He sat up and took her hand, forcing it inside his when she resisted. "Really. I promise. And I like that you were so concerned for me." He smoothed down his hair and smiled at her.

"You really are well?"

"Of course." He stopped as Maria squeezed his hand. His knuckles twinged as though bruised. "I did have a most unusual dream, though."

She released his hand and smiled at him. "Maybe that explains why your boots are at the top of the stairs." Maria giggled.

"Perhaps," he replied absently, staring at the fresh, raw scrape-marks on the back of his knuckles.

Ω

Robert rolled over in bed, fumbling sleepily for the blanket. A fire burned in the bedroom hearth to ward off the unseasonable cold, but it did nothing to warm Robert. His hand groped aimlessly, as though blind, detached from his body. Struggling to remain asleep, he flopped a hand over the edge of the bed to see if the blanket had fallen on the floor.

"I want to stay asleep," he muttered, even though there was nobody there to hear. The wind rattled the windows in answer. First one side, then the other, knocking on the frame. A rhythmical tapping, over and over. The way a man, bored of his surroundings, might drum his fingers.

In a heartbeat, Robert was awake, sitting rigidly upright.

Startled, he searched the room to find whatever it was that had caused him to wake. The windows were still closed and shuttered, the fire still smouldered and, as far as he could see, there was nothing in the room that should not have been there. The missing blanket he was searching for earlier lay on the floor on the far side of the bed, where Maria must have thrown it. Robert took a deep breath to steady himself and lay back down.

His eye focused on the fire. It still burned, the flames high and strong, but the room was colder than a meat cellar. The colours seemed washed out, hidden behind a veil of silk. Robert slid out of bed and walked towards the fire. He felt no warmth on his skin as he drew nearer. His eyes fixed on the slowly waving flames. The lord took a small step, fingers inching towards the fireplace.

He could feel his heart beating, his breath coming hard and misty. He wanted to touch the flames and confirm that, despite their deathly pallor and lack of heat, they were real. But at the same time, he was afraid to touch them. What if they were not real?

"Foolish thoughts," he muttered, looking around the room. His wife was still asleep, the blanket puddled on the floor beside her. And in the open doorway stood the pale little boy. He looked

at Robert with a smile made of sadness and hope, then hurriedly looked away again.

Without a word, the boy left the room. Robert followed him instinctively. This time, he would not get angry. He had to know what was happening. Bare feet making no sound on the floor, he followed the boy towards the stairs. They passed a dark smear on the wall and Robert realised that it was his blood, left there when he'd cut his hand trying to grab the boy.

"I won't hurt you." He whispered the words, fearing that any loud noise might shatter the circumstances. If the strange boy heard, he gave no sign.

They passed down the stairs and into the front entrance hall. The grand double doors stood open, flung full against the walls as though by a giant hand. The boy marched into the shadows beyond, quickly swallowed by tendrils of mist that rose to greet him.

For only a moment, Robert stopped. He looked at his bare feet, at the open doors that should have been locked and barred. Morris had locked them while Robert watched. They could not be open now any more than a lord could run around even his own his garden with no boots on.

He ran after the boy, nightshirt flapping around his waist. Robert caught up to him, barely visible in the congealing mists, before he felt the first bite of the freezing night in his bones.

The boy continued walking across the grounds with deliberate purpose. With every moment, Robert became more and more certain that this was Richard Tarwell, and that Richard Tarwell knew exactly where he was going. His stride was unchanged but Robert quickly found himself left behind. He started running again, the figure of the boy vanishing into the unending pale mist.

"No," he shouted. "Come back!" He kept running, praying that the boy was heading in a straight line. Dancing mist filled most of his vision, breaking for only brief moments to show half-imagined faces and curious outlines.

Robert blundered through the thick white mist, groping blindly ahead with his arms outstretched. The boy was completely gone from sight. Robert stumbled on, the smooth lawn reaching up in the darkness to trip him.

His fingers scraped over tree bark, tearing little pieces off. The shards stuck under his nails, breaking the skin. Blood began to seep out, running under the nails and staining his fingers.

"Where are you?" His desperate cry was answered by the mist, clearing in a little circle around his feet.

The Tarwell boy stood close by. The roots of the great oak pushed above the soil almost all the way around the base of the tree, but in one patch the ground was smooth and flat as a croquet lawn. As a boy, Robert remembered sitting there to rest in the tree's shade. It was there that the boy stood. His smile was gone, his face blank.

Robert watched the boy lie down and sink into the ground.

Howling, Robert leapt at the patch of ground, ripping up grass and tearing at the soil. He threw great clumps of dirt over his shoulders, every handful driving the bark splinters into his hands. Snarling like a starving dog, Robert clawed at the earth, staining his body and his clothes. Every time he pulled a little dirt away, his weight caused more to fall back in its place.

Slowly, gradually, Robert stopped. He regained his composure. Sweat covered his body as much as the unmindfully discarded soil. For the first time that night, he felt cold. He looked at the shallow pit he had created, the loose soil he had been pawing through. Somebody else had dug here recently.

Rising, determined to reach the end of this, Robert ran back towards the house. He could see even before he reached them that the doors stood locked and bolted. Robert hammered on them for a moment, calling for aid. Nobody came, although he thought he could hear voices, perhaps footsteps. No time to wait.

He turned and ran towards the stables, still shouting as best as he could with ragged breath, for men to help him dig. As he burst into the stables, one of the horse handlers dropped down from his sleeping place in the hayloft, clumsily brandishing a wooden-handled shovel.

"My Lord?" His face was twisted from the effort of making this undressed, filthy man match the image of Lord Robert Starkey, richest man in Devon.

"Yes, yes," Robert snapped. "Come with me!"

Another face appeared from the hayloft, this one upside down and sending scraps of straw drifting to the ground. "You

too," Robert commanded, pointing at the second lad. "And bring a spade."

Ω

Dawn came before they reached the filthy cloth bundle at the bottom of the hole. There were four of them digging now, stripped to the waist and with grim faces. Robert watched them, holding Maria's hand and swaddled in a blanket. The rest of the servants stood clustered around the tree, silent. Even the birds made no sound.

The four men in the hole raised the cloth up to the ground and set it down gently. Robert moved forward and peeled back a corner of the mud-encrusted sheet. He already knew what was in there.

Richard Tarwell's tiny face gazed back at him, utterly expressionless. The same way Robert had last seen him, sinking into his unworthy grave. He tucked the corner back in and stepped away. Maria took his hand and Robert felt it tremble.

"Fetch the rector," he ordered. The servants exchanged glances for a moment, until finally one of them slipped off towards the stables. Robert took a moment to work out what the problem was.

"Where's Morris?"

He did not wait for an answer, instead marching towards the house. A hot, sick swelling grew in his stomach, fuelling his suspicion and his fury. He smashed open the door to the butler's room with the wrath of a thunderstorm. Why was he not outside, where they should all be?

That was where he found the butler's body, dangling from the ceiling. His mouth hung open, his eyes half-closed as the top lids fell down. Robert's hands curled into angry fists, powerless and outraged. Morris' leg twitched once as Robert made for a small square of folded paper on the bed, unable to look at the body. He left the room with his eyes cast down and his shoulders curled over, shutting the door softly and sealing off the grisly sight. He opened the letter, trembling from cold and fear.

It was me. I robbed you, not the boy. In truth, I have been doing this for many years, for I have a great number of illegitimate children to feed and, generous as your lordship has always been, I could not have asked you to support them. It is most unfortunate that the boy discovered us in the act on this occasion. I never meant to kill him. I regret that most sincerely.

My accomplices can be found in a guest house in Exeter, the Silver Falcon. They are individuals unknown to you, by the names of Edward Rokesby and Jonathon Church...

Robert stopped reading, crushing the note in his fist, forgetting the names of the other robbers as soon as he read them. The note fell to the ground. Robert stepped over it and started to open the door to the butler's room.

He froze, unable to carry on, numb fingers curled around the metal handle. Nothing made sense, the loss of the butler, the hideous truth. Could he have prevented this? Robert pressed his head against the door, heart thundering. He pushed the handle a little further, then stopped.

Morris had been acting oddly. It was little things, unusual words and an out-of-character coldness. Things Robert should have noticed, but had not, as he had not been at home enough.

"Robert?"

He turned away from the door to face his wife. She gave him an encouraging smile. Without thinking, Robert put his foot on the note and scraped it along the floor, away from even her. If she noticed, Maria gave no sign.

Putting her hand on his shoulder, she asked, "Is anything the matter?"

"No," Robert lied. "Nothing."

She nodded encouragingly. "Shall I wait for you outside?"

Grateful for the assistance, Robert forced himself to smile. "Yes, that will be good." He watched her walk away without moving until he heard the heavy front doors shut. Then he turned and opened the door to Morris' bedroom.

Gently, Robert reached up, stretching on the tips of his toes, and eased Morris off the noose. He cradled the body as he moved it to the bed and, carefully, laid the face of his childhood to rest. Forcing his emotions down, Robert pulled the rope from the

ceiling and pushed it under the bed, then kicked the letter under. Later, he would come back and destroy the evidence of his failure.

Shutting the door silently, he clenched his face into a mask that could not betray him and walked outside to find his wife.

Simon Searle
May, 2009

Simon Searle is a British writer who tries to create stories about things that are unusual, or at least not boring. He started writing at an early age and hasn't stopped since. He is currently studying for a degree in History and English Literature which provides both a constant source of inspiration and plenty of free time. He enjoys reading, long naps on the couch and hiding from debt collectors. In the future, he hopes to write enough to cross one of those three off the list. This is his first printed publication and he hopes to have his debut novel completed soon.

Wail of the Spaceswimmer

Richard Pitaniello

Few twelve-year-old boys would sit around a campfire and tell prophecies instead of ghost stories and lewd jokes. That's what the four boys were doing that summer night though, just being weird like they always were. At school and at home, they were weirdoes--and they loved it.

The campfire flushed skin red and then hid that color under a soft glaze of orange. Black clouds covered the stars. The shivering firelight didn't reach beyond the trees that circled the clearing, so nothing beyond that existed. They knew there was a shed nearby, roofless and buckling, empty except for a cracked saddle and some wood. But it might as well have been in the black of space.

The boys were oblivious to it, and to the grumbling thunder. They hadn't put the tent up yet. It was sitting off to the side with rolled-up plastic sheeting that would cover the ground

under the tent. Nobody noticed. They were listening to Mark's prophecy.

"Then the boy realizes that the body parts all belong to him and nobody else, so he rides his horse into the night, screaming and holding the guts of a slain opponent above him."

"So who's going to do that?" one of the boys, Terry, asked, raising one bushy eyebrow.

"I don't know," Mark told him.

"Then it's not a very good prophecy," Paul piped in, juggling two stones above his head and trying not to smirk at Terry's looks of jealously. *Dexterity, my friend,* he gloated in his mind. *Dexterity.*

"Why does a prophecy have to name people?" Mark asked, interrupting his smug thoughts.

Before he could answer, Terry cut in: "Maybe we should just tell ghost stories."

"No," Paul said flatly. "Things that haven't happened yet are scarier than things that have already happened. Everyone knows that."

"What if they don't happen?" Mark asked.

Paul smirked. "They *will* happen, my friend--we'll make sure of it. There's no such thing as fate, but once a prophecy gets in your mind, your mind makes it happen. Isn't that right, Christopher?"

Christopher nodded but didn't say anything--as usual.

Terry asked: "Do you have a better prophecy, Paul?"

"Yeah," Paul told him, catching the stones in one hand. "It's a real prophecy I read in a book."

Paul was lying, but the other three listened silently.

Paul spoke: "A ship will be torpedoed in the Atlantic. It'll sink, but some survivors will make it to a lifeboat. There won't be room for all of them, so one man will have to hold on to the side and ride with his legs and waist trailing in the water. He'll die."

Paul paused for effect, but the other boys didn't seem to notice, so Paul kept talking: "They won't see anything in the water, but the man clinging to the raft will *feel* something...something grabbing his leg. He'll yell to the other men in the boat, and they'll try to pull him up, but this thing won't let go. The man will feel pulpy arms wrapping around his torso. Then one of the 'arms' will

shoot out of the water and wrap itself around his neck. The men on the boat will still try to help him, but there won't be anything they can do.

"That's when they'll see what it is. It will rise up out of the water behind him. First its arms, its *tentacles*, then its pink arrow-shaped body and its shiny black eyes as big as baseballs. Its body will be as large as a surfboard. For a few seconds the thing will just float there, its long arms swaying in the air overhead, above the men on the boat. And then every one of those arms will curl up around the man clinging to the side of the boat, one muffling his cries as it slips over his mouth. He will let go and it will pull him under the purple water, which will turn black with blood."

"Blood isn't black," Christopher cut in, brushing black hair behind his ear. It was the first time he had spoken the entire night. Sometimes he went quiet for days, his eyes sullen below the widow's peak he had his barber cut every visit before they dyed his hair black--his Dracula look.

"It can be," Paul insisted, running a hand through his own black hair (natural).

"What was that thing?" Mark asked. "An octopus?"

"No," Paul told him. "It was a giant squid."

"Those are only in Jules Verne novels," Terry scoffed. "Do you think we're dumb enough to believe in sea monsters? 'Cause we aren't."

"No, I'm serious--they're real. This is why you're failing science."

"Paul is right about the squid," Christopher whispered, apparently talkative tonight. He stared at his big hands with long thumbnails that he cut into two-pronged forks each month--more of his Dracula look. "There's one at the Smithsonian, down in D.C. But I don't remember if its eyes were black." He paused. "But you know, Paul, that story of yours isn't a prophecy. It happened to navy men in World War II. You're a liar."

Paul stared at him without talking.

"So those things are real?" Terry asked.

Christopher nodded. "I don't remember if the Smithsonian one was as big as Paul's though."

"They get even bigger than that," Paul said quickly, light-blue eyes flashing in the night. "My dad gave a lecture about them

for Bio 101. Sperm whales have vomited up tentacles that were forty feet long. And people have found dead whales with sucker marks on them--"

"Suckers are on octopuses," Terry interrupted. "You should know that, dad being a professor and all."

Silence.

"Squid have them too," Paul said, smirking now, "and their suckers have rings of claws. Pick up a book." A pause. "Anyway, there was a whale that had marks on it that were so big the squid that killed it would've had to be two hundred feet long."

"Bull," Terry protested. "You're mixing facts."

"No. It's true," Paul insisted.

"Nothing is that big. And nothing can kill a sperm whale," Terry said, shaking his head. "They eat giant squid."

"The squid fight back. And sometimes they win."

There was silence for a few seconds.

"Deep down, the water is darker than night," Paul continued. "There are things there with spots that glow like stars and bodies that glow like the moon."

"So what?" Terry said. "You'll never go there to see it, so what's it to you?"

"People do go down there...in submarines. They've seen these things. One day *I'll* see the glowing fishes too.

"You know," Paul continued, staring off into the sky as he talked, "those things under the sea, it's like they're from a different world."

"You're getting corny again," Terry told him.

"I'm serious," he told Terry. "Do you know of any glowing animals on land?"

Some fireflies flashed.

"Okay, so bugs do it." Paul admitted. "Do you know of any other *animals?"*

"Bugs are animals," Terry pointed out.

"You know what I mean," Paul said quickly. "The things in the sea are so different than anything on Earth."

"'On Earth?' Paul, the oceans are *on the Earth.* Fish are *on the Earth* too."

"Yes, but are they *from* the Earth?"

There was silence.

Terry spoke again. "Of course they're from the Earth."

"How do you know?" Paul asked.

"Where else could they be from?"

"Other planets."

"Paul, they can't be from other planets. How would they get to Earth?"

"Have you heard of ether?" Paul asked him.

"Yeah, it puts you to sleep," Terry replied.

"No, not that. I mean the stuff in space."

"Space is empty."

"No it's not. It has tiny particles of--"

"Terry is right," Christopher said, speaking once more, his pale skin flashing sherbet-orange in the firelight. "Space is empty. Nobody believes in ether anymore, Paul. It's a dead theory." He waved one of his large hands in a sweeping motion.

"But some people used to believe it, even if others didn't," Paul told him. "Maybe they *both* are right. Maybe space is empty *now*, but it used to be full of ether, like air but thinner."

"And where did all the ether go?" Terry asked, closing his dark eyes.

"Maybe it's still here."

"What? Where?"

"Here! Right here on Earth."

"Where?"

"The oceans."

Deep silence surrounded them. They could almost hear the fireflies buzz.

"Are you saying that the universe used to be full of water?" Mark asked.

"Well...yes," Paul said. "And no. You see--"

Three sets of shoulders slumped, but they didn't interrupt him.

"--the water *used to be* ether, but then all of it was slowly pulled towards planets by gravity or something. Some of it thickened and stuck to the surface of the Earth, making the oceans. The rest of it never grew as thick as water, and it made the air."

"That's absurd," Terry said.

"There's more." Paul was undeterred. "What if there were creatures that could swim through the ether when it was still ether,

that *lived in it.* They could swim through space, traveling from planet to planet as they liked."

"That would take too long," Terry protested. "And they'd freeze to death. Space is cold."

"It's cold *now,"* Paul said. "But it was different when it had all the ether. Pure ether can be any temperature. It all depends on what the creature needs to live. Ether *nourishes* life. It distorts time too, enough to let someone travel between the planets."

"Gee, this ether sounds *wonderful,"* Terry said sarcastically. "Just like magic."

"It is," Paul said.

"Paul, water and air aren't magic," Christopher said slowly.

Paul tilted his head. "Air and water both keep us alive, don't they? That's magic."

"But if the ether's gone, then space is too cold to live in *now,"* Terry pointed out. "So nothing is going to come down from the stars."

"It's cold underwater, and fish don't die there. And pure ether is better than water." Paul shook his head. "Those things in the sea...they're not from here. They used to live in ether...in space...but now they prefer water."

"Prefer?"

"What if they can still swim through space?"

"Intergalactic whales?" Terry muttered.

"I don't know, something like that," Paul snapped.

"But you said there was no more ether in space?"

"There is now," Paul said, grinning.

The expression on the faces of the other three boys clearly said, *What the hell are you talking about?*

Paul filled them in. "My dad knows another professor at the University. This guy designed a machine, kind of like a bomb really. And NASA sent it into space years ago. When it gets far enough out, it'll explode."

"Why would NASA waste that much money on something that only blows up?" Terry asked.

"It's not being wasted," Paul said. "It's an Ether Bomb. When it blows up, it will fill our solar system with ether again. The planets will be connected to Earth for the first time since creation. And flying through space will be no more difficult than flying

through air. Even *sound* will be able to travel through space if it's loud enough. And the creatures that used to swim through the ether...they'll be free to roam between planets once more."

"When is this bomb going to blow up?" Christopher asked.

"It blew up two months ago," Paul told him. He paused, smiling so hard it looked like he was trying to touch his temples with his lips.

For a few seconds, there was silence. Then...

"Does anybody have a *real* prophecy?" Terry asked.

"I have one," Christopher said. They all turned to listen, Paul reluctantly. Christopher discussed something about the president drinking blood to gain the powers of his conquered opponents. *You're so stupid,* Paul fumed. *It figures that* you'd *talk about vampirism, you straight-A Christopher Lee-wannabe, thinking it's cool to make other people think that you want them to think you're a vampire...or whatever your plan is. To Hell with vampires.*

Your prophecy sucked too, Mark. Gibberish about some warrior holding body parts above his head and riding off on a horse. Bullshit. At least giant squids are real.

I wish I could see one, and see what lives at the bottom of the sea. Stupid friends. I'd give you all away for a chance, once chance....

He paused, slightly disturbed by what he had just thought. *I wouldn't really do that....*

Then he made himself listen to Christopher's story, fighting the urge to retreat into the roof-less shed where he would sit on the horse-less saddle and juggle with his tiny nimble hands, locking his eyes on the sky.

They didn't have time for any more prophecies thought, because they felt the first feather-light drops of rain and suddenly remembered their tent. They cleared the sticks off where they were going to pitch the tent in the light of the campfire and two flashlights, and spread some plastic sheeting down. They'd brought more sheeting than they needed, and so they left the extra in a crumpled pile off to the side. It looked like a glassy rag. The rain was merely drizzle for the rest of the time it took to set up the tent; then came down harder, smothering the fire which took Terry half an hour to build and light even though Paul had said it would've taken five minutes if Terry would've just listened to his advice.

They were all ready to climb inside now, and went in to

unroll their sleeping bags.

But those bags crossed each other.

The tent was too small for the four of them. One would have to sleep outside.

They argued over who this would be for a few minutes, but the rain was getting stronger. Finally Mark agreed he'd sleep outside, but only if he could use the extra sheets of plastic as a blanket and if he could stick his head into the tent where it would be dry. They agreed.

Paul let the other boys help Mark with that; he just took off his shoes and crawled into his sleeping bag, thinking of sea and space. *I will go to the sea,* he told himself. *I'll go even farther.... Gods, any one of you, or devils even...give me a chance. I only need one chance. Let me go to the stars....*

Terry and Christopher joined him when they were finished helping Mark get set up. They all wrapped their shoes in another piece of plastic sheeting by the tent door and crawled into their own sleeping bags without saying anything. Paul was facing the open flap of the tent, and watched as Mark tried to get comfortable and then stopped moving. Paul stared at Christopher's big hands with his thumbnails cut to knives, annoyed with himself that he hadn't thought of that first, silently wishing his little hands were as big as Christopher's. *What couldn't I juggle then?*

He listened to the rain patter on the plastic sheet Mark was sleeping under. The rain grew stronger and this drumming grew louder. Fog was growing. "The ether is coming back," Paul whispered to himself, now smiling. "Boom boom, goes the Ether Bomb."

He hoped nobody had heard him. Then he figured, *Who cares?*

The sound of rain smothered his thoughts away, soothing him and the other boys to sleep.

Ω

In the middle of the night, Terry shook Paul and Christopher awake and said, "Wake up! I can't find Mark."

Paul snapped his eyes open, but didn't move. He just stared, trying to take in the scene. Terry was on his knees.

Christopher sat up. Terry shook Paul again, and Paul pushed his hands away.

"Mark is gone!" Terry insisted.

Paul lifted his head and looked out the tent flap. Mark wasn't there. Not only that, but the plastic was gone too. There was nothing left but a wet spot on the tent floor where the rain had blown in. A mud puddle sat beyond the door, next to their scattered shoes, but the fog was so thick now it was hard to see beyond that.

Terry called Mark's name. He didn't wait for an answer, but got out his flashlight and stepped into the dark. His foot splashed into the muddy puddle by the tent flap. He walked farther. In seconds he was out of sight, lost in the dense fog with only the flashlight beam visible, calling Mark's name over and over. The light green walls of the tent would glow every time the flashlight swung in their direction, the raindrops standing out like black freckles on the walls. Christopher and Paul looked out the tent flap.

That's when Paul realized: there were no raindrops, and there weren't any ripples in the puddle by the tent. The water was still swaying because of Terry stepping into it, but nothing more. No rain was striking it.

Paul heard rain though. It was quieter, but there were definitely raindrops splattering. Paul tried to pass it off as the trees rustling in the wind...but the sides of the tent weren't moving. *There isn't any wind,* he realized. *The trees can't be rustling.*

Terry was still calling Mark's name.

Then there was another sound now: a low cry, like a wailing trombone.

Suddenly a sharp sound crackled in everyone's ears as something fell onto the ashes of their smothered fire. Terry stopped and pointed the light at it.

It was a piece of plastic sheeting with glistening stripes of red-black blood crisscrossing each other on its surface. The flashlight made them glow scarlet.

There was another echoing moan.

Terry's hand began to tremble, and the light shook. Tendrils of fog swirled around him, as if trying to wrap him up like a Christmas present.

There was a ripping sound, like wet wool tearing.

Blood splattered on top of the tent. The light turned towards the tent and lit up the wall, but it wasn't strong enough to penetrate the blood--the splatters were still black. Tendrils dripped down the walls, as if someone were drawing on the outside of the tent with a black marker. *Those stains might never come out of the fabric,* Paul knew.

Terry ran. Paul could see the light from the flashlight grow fainter out of the open tent flap. Then Terry screamed.

The light hit the tent again, only this time it was coming from *above them,* casting shadows down onto the figures of Paul and Christopher.

Then the light fell. They heard it smack the mud, and it landed facing the opening in the tent, blinding Paul. He put his hand over his eyes, and could only hear what happened next. More tearing sounds, again like wet cloth, but now with crunching and snapping accompanying it. Many more dark things hit the mud a short distance from the tent.

Then there was only the background sound of the rain. No more moans or rips. Christopher started biting off one thumb nail and moved, blocking the blinding light from Paul's eyes. Now Paul could see again--but there was nothing to see. The only movement was the blood sliding down the sides of the tent. Paul counted how long it took to go from the top to the bottom...

...but some of the blood was wiped away before it could finish. Something was pushing against the side of the tent, like a fist smearing the blood all around, streaking it ran left to right. The fist--*What else could it be?* Paul wondered--pushed at the fabric, as if trying to get in. Christopher finished biting off his thumbnail and spit it out.

Then another fist joined in, this time on the other side of the tent. Another. Another.

Now half a dozen pieces of flesh slapped against the fabric, shaking the entire tent...but now Paul could see that they weren't fists. *They couldn't be.* They were too sharp, shaped too much like a cone, a finger or a tail or a snake hanging above the tent.

Then they stopped thrashing and began to sway serenely. Another moan sounded.

Christopher was trembling. Paul was not.

The snakes moved down the sides of the tent. Then they reached under it. It was just as they began to lift the tent off the ground that Christopher panicked and ran out the tent flap, his shape black against the flashlight blare.

The snakes let go of the tent and were on him in less than a second. Paul could see Christopher silhouetted along with the snakes, the *tentacles,* that wrapped around him. There was a ripping sound once more, but Paul saw it all this time, saw Christopher's body explode and splatter blood everywhere. His hand landed in front of the tent, palm up, as if waiting for someone to give him something.

Paul crawled out of the sleeping bag and grabbed the hand, pulling it to his chest, accidentally stabbing himself with the sharpened thumbnail. *I got the one he didn't bite down.*

The tentacles reached under the tent again, and this time ripped it off the ground. The tent collapsed once it was in the air, enveloping Paul like a net.

The tentacles dropped it.

Paul thrashed desperately, trying to work his way out of the folds of fabric. Eventually he did, and flopped around on the mud for a few seconds. Then he stood up, the ground chilling his feet, his fingers still clutching Christopher's hand. He ran...

...and felt the rain hit him once more. He stood still. *There was no rain falling over the tent,* he thought wildly.

It only fell a few more seconds before it stopped.

However, he could still hear rain splattering just ten feet in front of him.

He ran, felt the rain again and stood still.

The rain stopped once more.

Paul realized the truth: something was blocking the rain, something immense, something that was hovering *above* him.

He looked up.

The clouds had apparently lifted, because above him the full moon glowed brightly along with the stars. He looked back for the tentacles; they were behind him, swaying gently as if only from wind. Paul's eyes traced them as they rose up into the fog, which swirled with tendrils of its own.

Paul stuffed Christopher's hand in his pants pocket absentmindedly.

The tentacles led up to the moon.

But how could they? he wondered. *And why aren't clouds covering the moon?*

He stared at it.

Something was wrong with the moon. There was a dot in the center of it as large as baseball, and the glowing stars seemed to shift and move. Paul looked away, and turned back to the campsite. The tangled tent lay near the bloody plastic sheeting. The rain was now cleaning both, droplets of water mixing with smears of blood, melting into one another. The flashlight was still glowing through the fog.

Paul ran once more, back to the campsite. He snatched the flashlight off the ground and shined it at the tentacles. Their flesh was an icy light-blue, but the suckers were pink and they were lined with thorns that pulsed in and out of the suckers, apparently retractable. The tentacles were still swaying, not attacking. Paul moved the light along them, up towards the moon.

When it reached the moon, the dot in the center shrunk from the size of a baseball to the size of a quarter.

It's not a moon, Paul knew.

It's an eye.

And the stars aren't in the sky. They're on the creature's skin. Just like the fishes in the sea, Paul thought.

Then he realized the truth, realized that he had been right in all his theories, realized that the Ether Bomb had indeed worked.

Suddenly, he knew what to do. *One chance....*

The eye began to grow smaller as the creature drew back into the sky.

"Take me," Paul said quietly.

The eye stared back, never twitching, never blinking as the thing retreated.

He spoke louder. "Take me...take me with you."

It didn't respond, but kept backing away from him, its tentacles almost getting tangled as they began whipping around.

Paul screamed at it: "Take me with you!"

The creature slowed, floated serenely.

And Paul dropped the flashlight and ran away, out of the clearing to the crumbling shed. He practically tore the door off its rotten hinges and picked up the wet saddle, cracked and slimy and

dripping. Then he ran back towards the hovering creature, the Space Swimmer, holding the saddle over his head, screaming "Wait!" over and over, trying to throw his dreams at it with his mind, hoping this thing had telepathy or something, anything.

For a few moments it merely stared at him.

Then the creature reached for Paul again, and he let it grab him. It pulled him up over it, past the eye and the tentacles' roots onto its wine bottle body where another eye swiveled and glowed. Paul dropped the saddle a little behind the eyes, wondering who would buckle the straps. Then he saw the tentacles fiddle with the straps and buckle it in place. *It read my mind,* Paul thought, smiling.

The Space Swimmer set Paul down onto the wet saddle. Visions of slipping off wet leather and dying flashed through Paul's mind, and soon a tentacle wrapped around his waist for a seatbelt, thorns retracted into the suckers. He laughed, staring straight into the glowing eye. "Thank you," he told it, out loud and in his mind.

He could see the tentacles whipping around crazily below the creature's body, silhouetted in the light of his discarded flashlight. The great eye never blinked, but kept staring straight at him with phosphorescent glow. The Space Swimmer moaned once more, like a foghorn on a boat.

Something occurred to Paul, a memory of talking with his three friends around the campfire, about his prophecy of the squid and the boat. Paul said out loud: "You were wrong, guys. I told a great prophecy."

He giggled, suddenly knowing that the Space Swimmer was indeed psychic, that it had heard his prophecy and had heard his wish...and then come into the night to make it come true--all for Paul.

Paul laughed again, thinking back to Mark's prophecy about a warrior riding off with body parts held high. "You got yours it right too, Mark," he whispered.

Then the Space Swimmer swooped off into the night. Paul laughed in the rain, taking out Christopher's hand and holding it high above his head.

Down below, the flashlight glared onto mud littered with cuts of meat and bloody plastic, all that remained of his friends.

Richard Pitaniello
May, 2009

Richard Pitaniello lurks in libraries, Latin halls, and backwoods forests. He wrote sporadically for his childhood years, until one Christmas when his writing exploded. He's been published by *Withersin, Dreams and Nightmares, Sporty Spec, Down in the Cellar,* and *Something Wicked.* The ocean has been a great source of fear for him ever since he read too many science books about sharks, giant squid, colossal jellyfish, and sea monsters as a kid. He was also a fan of Peter Benchley's nature-on-the-rampage novels *Jaws* and *Beast,* but he doubts they had much to do with "Wail of the Space Swimmer."

Jason Hinchcliffe

Home

It's only forty-five minutes into my shift and I'm already dreading the next seven hours. Time, which barely registers during those fleeting moments we are happy, seems at others like it has no end. And in these past few years, I've watched a lifetime pass.

The wind has picked up outside. It shrieks so loud against the rubber-and-felt window seals I'm barely aware of the dull roar of voices behind me. I open the door and even this is drowned out by the wind's angry wail. Two men climb into the bus, clutching scarves around their necks in a vain attempt to keep the cold at bay. In unison, they shake their heads as they pass, sprinkling my arm with a soft white down that melts the moment it touches the cloth.

I'm in such a hurry to close the door and get under way that I don't even notice the old woman signaling for me to wait as she hurries to reach the bus. But someone near the back yells "Stop!" and then I see her in my side mirror, running, arm waving,

miraculously keeping her balance as she navigates the slush and snow. I tread heavily on the brake and come to a stop a few feet away, the front tire resting on the curb.

She looks everywhere but right at me as she climbs the first step; she pauses there and she looks so disoriented that I'm not sure if it's pain or confusion that keeps her from coming the rest of the way in. I swing my good leg around the seat but then sit frozen, wondering what is stopping me from getting up to help. There is something about the old woman, about her bearing: perhaps the raised chin, or the backwards thrust of her shoulders that speaks of a dignity more important, more necessary, than any amount of discomfort.

I feel myself sitting down, my lips crinkling into a smile as she walks slowly past. I close the door and the cold is snuffed out by a dry blast of artificial heat. Soon, everything recedes from my mind but the monotony of the route, and beneath that, the dull inkling of a pain I'm never allowed to forget.

I used to have a great job (once upon a time) driving a truck across the country, hauling steel. Good money. Full benefits. As much overtime as I wanted. But one night, I got careless. In the middle of the godforsaken countryside, I fell asleep at the wheel, and didn't wake up until two days later in a hospital bed. Most of the right side of my body was covered in a plaster cast, the skin underneath prickling horribly like an arm after you've been lying on it too long.

I didn't find out about the burns until later.

A police officer (I think his name was Lewis, or something like that) had seen my head-lights from the highway, a 'slight discoloration in the sky', as he'd initially called it in. God knows what he was doing on that particular stretch of road on that particular night. I don't really care. He found my truck laying on its side a hundred feet away, cab in flames, the engine miraculously still running. In his haste to reach the overturned vehicle he'd run right past me, but nearly stumbled over me on the way back to his car. I'd managed to drag myself to the ditch before I collapsed, unconscious, nearly drowning in two inches of water. My arm was bent almost double beneath me, and my leg was twisted horribly to the side as if someone had ripped it off and then re-attached it the wrong way.

Lewis (or was it Nichols?) told me later when he visited me in the hospital that my clothes were still smoldering in places, and the flesh had started to blister. He told me I was lucky he'd found me, that I was lucky to be alive. But lying there in my hospital bed, in so much pain that I couldn't bear to be covered with a blanket, I asked what it was that made me lucky. The question shocked him, as though he couldn't believe someone wouldn't know the answer without asking. Then he told me, the wrinkles crinkling around his eyes as he spoke: "Life." He walked out of the room, and I didn't see him again.

Life.

So now I am a cripple, more or less. My arm was shattered so completely that even a year later my grip is no stronger than a kid's. My leg is held together by a bunch of metal pins, so rigid that when I walk, it's in a curious up-and-down, up-and-down motion that sends sharp stabs of pain through the entire length of my spine.

A few weeks after the accident, I picked up the phone, and a muted voice on the other end told me I no longer had a job; they decided I was a liability to the company, and couldn't risk a repeat incident. The voice told me not to worry. It reassured me my needs would be taken care of. I tried to explain that there would never be another 'incident', that I would never fall asleep at the wheel again —even with the painkillers, it hurt so much that sleep had become next to impossible. I wanted to tell him how I'd been off work long enough, too long, how I'd started spending hours and hours sitting in restaurants and coffee shops, just sitting there until someone would lose their patience and ask me to leave. But the line was dead.

Days, maybe months later, I was sitting in the corner booth of a rundown little pub where people didn't seem to mind my presence so much. The evening news was blaring on the little black-and-white television above my head, disrupting any thoughts more complex than what I wanted to drink next, or whether or not I wanted to order food. I was looking around for the waitress when the front door opened and my brother-in-law walked in, who I hadn't seen in years except for the single dutiful visit he and my sister paid to the hospital while I was there.

He walked right over to me and I didn't bother asking how he found me. Without sitting down, he snapped a business card on the desk and told me to call the number.

"You have to do something with yourself," he said. "You can't go on like this."

The card was for a city employee.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"Just call."

He didn't say anything else, just looked at me with his lip curling the tiniest bit before walking out of the pub.

I was interviewed on the spot as I leaned awkwardly against the bar's payphone, hearing in the person's voice a trace of disgust that made me wonder what favors my brother-in-law had called in to get me this opportunity. I was told my driving experience was a definite asset, and I need only take a short course to receive my bus license.

So once again I'm driving for a living—driving the same route for as many hours as they will let me, secretly swallowing only enough of the little white pills to keep the red haze from clouding my vision.

The next stop is my worst. A college and two high-schools holding god-knows-how-many kids are jammed into a six-block radius, and I have the misfortune of driving the cross-town route. It's 3:20. I grit my teeth in anticipation. Sure enough, I round the corner and the street is covered by a tide of flesh and bright cloth. The doors squeak open and they begin to file on in never-ending streams, more than one jostling my unbending leg in their carelessness. I don't close the doors until passengers have filled every seat and every inch of the floor, and are spilling onto the stairs beside me. For the next few stops, they trickle off, but their numbers hardly seem to lessen. People waiting in the cold take one look through the open doors and shake their heads, choosing to wait for another bus in the discomfort of the wind and snow instead.

The heat grows unbearable as the air is snuffed by the crush of flesh. I roll the window down a little and breathe deeply the cold air, feeling the tiniest bit of relief. But it is only seconds before a voice calls out behind me, not a question but a demand. "Could you shut the window, please!" I fight the urge to throw the window

even wider but instead do as asked, and then feel my fingers touch lightly the temperature control, pushing it a little further into the red. I don't wait for a thank-you. I don't expect one.

And so the hours pass in a haze of repetition. I have enough self-control to make every stop, to register every complaint and avoid every potential collision. But beyond that, I allow time to drift unremarked. Eventually, night falls, and the darkness brings a peace of mind that had been impossible in the presence of boiling light. The number of passengers dwindles to nothing, and my shift draws to its end. With a sigh of relief, I dowse the overhead lights and turn the signs to read 'out of service'. I begin the drive through the backstreets that will take me to Main Street, and from there, to the depot, where my day will finally end.

I'm brought out of half-sleep by singing—a low, mewling voice that creeps unbidden into my mind, growing in intensity only as I become aware of it. There is something familiar about the melody, but I can't imagine where I might have heard it before. Panicked, I jam my foot on the brake for the second time that day, and the bus comes to a sliding stop. I can see a person's shape in the interior mirror, head and shoulders framed beneath the glare of a nearby street-lamp.

For a minute I just sit there, unsure what to say or do. "The route is over," I call out, unable to keep the frustration from my voice. The singing stops, and I see the figure shift slightly. A shaking hand grasps the seat-front, and ever so slowly a woman pulls herself to her feet. She begins walking forward without saying a word, the only sounds the dry rasp of her breath and the clump of heavy boots. And as her features fall further into the light, I gawk at them in recognition. In my mind I see her running against the wind, coat flapping to either side, arm outstretched. How can she still be on the bus? How can I not have noticed her until now?

I look at her again and see what I didn't notice before. Her face, though the face of an old woman, had been aged more by hardship than by years. Her hair is dry and ratty where it pokes out from under the fur-trimmed hat. Her heavy coat, tattered in places, filthy all over, looks ancient. A stale smell precedes her as she walks. I feel a sudden pang of pity, and try to meet her eyes in the mirror.

"Where can I take you?" I ask.

She does not answer, simply brushes past me and painstakingly climbs to the bottom step, careful not to let go of the rail. She doesn't avert her gaze from the closed doors in front of her.

"This is fine," she answers.

I open my mouth to argue. I want to demand that she tell me where she lives, where I can drive her, but again I find myself powerless. I sit looking at her with my mouth hanging open, choking on words that aren't there. Unbidden, her song fills my head, the somber melody beautiful for its sadness, and suddenly I'm opened to a peace unlike anything I've experienced before. My body feels like it is floating in water. Without further thought, my hand grips the door mechanism, and the night swallows us.

My eyes follow the old woman until the light spatter of her coat is lost in the dark. Only then do I put the bus into gear so I can travel the few remaining kilometers to the bus station, and from there, home.

Jason Hinchcliffe
May, 2009

Jason Hinchcliffe grew up in the small town of Cayuga, Ontario, where there was never much to do apart from getting into trouble and writing. When he wasn't doing the former, he turned his attention to the latter, and what started out as a relief from boredom quickly became a lifelong obsession. To this day, Jason continues to deflect from the otherwise (mostly-)dreary routine of work and reality television by losing himself in stories – the only difference being that now he retains hopes of someday earning money from writing them. Forthcoming are stories in Kaleidotrope and also 580 Split. His favorite novel is Watership Down. His favorite movie is A Clockwork Orange.

Trolley Dolly

Mark Fletcher

I'd stop right now if I could. I would toss the pen into a drawer or let it roll into the creases of the sofa and close the notepad I'm jotting this on if I just didn't feel like I had to continue. I think they call this cathartic - what a word. Like fecund - now how the bloody hell do you fit that in a sentence? I mean, I'm not going to say, *My love, you're looking fecund today.* I'd get a slap. But here I am writing away and to no one in particular. I'm not sure what I'll do with this once it's finished with, but if I don't write it down I'm going to start thinking I'm mad. If I put it into words I can see how crazy the whole thing is and not have my mind adding and subtracting bits to make the jumble worse. I want to read this and tell myself: *You've done nothing wrong. They're fine. She got nothing.*

I can't promise you a good story. I never was good at English at school - I liked numbers. You know where you are with numbers. All right, I know that when you get into the serious stuff

it's more complicated, but the highest I ever needed to go was Pythagoras for my GCSEs and here you have a right and a wrong answer. No, words and imagination seemed a bit useless to me and they still do. I mean take Greg Lilley, best writer at school and last I hear he's an accountant. Imagination's got an overblown reputation. That said, my story sounds like it came straight out of the little notepad Lilley would scribble in while we all played football. So bear with me; I can't promise a neat story, but it's a story nevertheless.

I wasn't drunk that night; I'd had five pints - I was merry. That perfect state where you just feel better. You can still walk reasonably straight and you don't mind the nonsense that your friends are talking about because you're talking that nonsense too. The walk back from the pub is about ten minutes. The missus was indoors watching the telly and I had been green carded for the night, so I'd made the most of it. It had been while I happily walked home that a female voice called out to me - I think it was near Spare Penny Lane.

At first she was just a shadow, a small mass of black like an ink stain on a picture, but as I got closer more details seeped into her. A fur coat that almost drowned her because she must have been about four foot nothing went from pavement to halfway up her face. On her head sat one of those Russian hats you see in films or documentaries.

"'Scuse me love?" It was a phlegmy voice like pebbles in mud when she spoke.

It was all shadow between the fur of hat and coat so I'd tried to make her face out while smiling, and as I was in a good mood I asked, "You all right?"

In response she stepped sideways to reveal one of those trolleys you see pensioners lugging about with the weekly shop. A little tartan affair of green, red and brown. "Sorry deary, but I'm a bit stuck. I've got my rounds to do and well," tiny hands appeared out of the coat sleeves and worked themselves nervously against each other, "I can't get this blasted thing to move - It's just too heavy."

"Bit late for rounds, ain't it?" I tried to consider what rounds would have an old woman walking the streets at nearly eleven at night, but I was too drunk to think that hard. I didn't even

give her a chance to answer. Finding some sense of chivalry that normally I misplace, I said, "I certainly could help you, darling. Bloody times we're in, eh; when they have you out at night trying to earn money?"

The old dear laughed, more a gurgle really. I could see her face now; a fleshy affair, she looked cheery enough although her eyes were far too small for her round face. To be honest she looked a bit like of a troll - something that lived under a bridge.

I took hold of the metal trolley and off we went. The old lady walked and I walked beside her. I wasn't worried about me, I mean I can take of myself, and she was tiny. I looked like a giant next to her. If anything I thought I was protecting her. We must have looked a right pair. I told her my name and she said she said she was called *Dolly*.

"Martin, I have to collect some things," she said.

"Oh, what types of things?"

"Different things. Lots and lots of different things."

I had looked at her then and she was smiling. She looked at me and I did my best to grin back.

"It shouldn't be too long, and then I'll be fine."

I dismissed her worries with the shake of a hand. "No probs. I'm in no hurry and really it's not right you being out at this time."

She just shook her head and for a moment I thought of an old pile of rubbish. I suppose her smell, like a soggy dog, had made me think of this and when I had looked at her I could see her furs were stained and grubby. In the pools of light from the street lamps I even caught a glimpse of a hole on the back of the arm. *Please don't tell me I'm helping a crazy old woman.* I remember thinking that. We'd walked for a long time, and I was just about to either ask her outright where we were going or make an excuse and leave - I can't be sure which - when she spoke up again. "Here we are."

We had stopped along the back of a line of terrace houses. The back gardens lined up alongside us and we stood next to a tall wooden gate.

"I'll just be a minute, love. It's a flying visit," she patted my arm. "Please can you watch my trolley? I don't know what I'd do without it."

"As long as you're not in there hours," I smiled.

"Oh no, no, no." And then she turned, pressed her hand against the gate and when this had smoothly opened she waddled away, the gate sighing shut behind her.

I was at a loss for a moment, standing on immobile legs, and again thought what an idiot I was. I was a victim of my own cowardice and sad old rules of obligation. In the fore of my mind was the notion that I had agreed to help the lady so I had better stay put and keep my hand on the cold metal handle of the granny bag.

I saw no lights come on, I heard no voices. That was a bit strange, but maybe she was picking something up that was left outside? I mean, you never see those charity people that drop things at your door, do you? You wake up and there's a little plastic bag all folded down neatly and if, as usually is the case, it doesn't get used and just sits there on the door step, somehow it vanishes back to wherever it came from. Someone has to be doing this – maybe it was Dolly?

I had not thought too long on the subject before the door opened and Dolly ambled out clutching a plastic Tesco's bag. Whatever had been in there didn't look big – about the size of a t-shirt rolled into a ball.

I tried to sneak a peek, but the old dear tutted and told me, "Now, now, did I say you can look?" She poked a tiny pick of a finger into my chest and then opened up a small corner of her bag and pushed her prize in. "Not for you, not from you or yours, love."

The fresh air, the walk and the strangeness of the night was clearing some of the fogginess from my head, and I remember catching an edge to her voice. You could have missed it if you didn't listen really carefully. When I think about it now it reminds me of a run-in I had with an old teacher at secondary school. She'd dragged me out a class for being a pest, we all have our moments, except when that teacher had talked to me through pursed lips I knew she had wanted nothing more than to give me a good slap. Dolly's voice had that same tone, that same tautness. *Easy,* I thought. *You know how people can get with little jobs* – I only thought she was taking things a little too seriously.

"What you got there, Dolly?" I asked anyway because it was the only thing I could think of doing.

She zipped the bag closed and then began walking again, talking as she went. "Uww, you nosey boy, but I can forgive you, you helping me like this." But she didn't continue.

The trundle of the little plastic wheels was the only sound for a moment, as they clicked and clacked over the pavement slabs. Whatever was in the bag weighed next to nothing and I struggled to see how Dolly could not have done this herself, but still I dutifully wandered along behind her.

"I've got to go in a minute." I spoke to her back. I actually had started to feel a bit uneasy about the whole thing. Doing her job or not, Dolly seemed a few cards short of a full deck. "The wife will be wondering where I am. I haven't even called to say I'm running late." This was definitely true.

Dolly whirled to face me. The poor light meant that I could only see darkness where her face was and from this hole she gushed, "Oh no! You can't; two more houses that's it." She looked around and took a step forward – I was relieved to see her face was still there. "And we're right here at the second stop. You're not far from home, are you?" Two little hands gripped my forearm like claws.

I looked around and sighed, "No, no I'm not far at all."

In fact I was only five minutes away – just around the corner. Strange that at the time I really was at a loss to remember the trip bringing me so close to home. Even now I've tried putting the pieces together, landmarks and road names, but I just can't for the life of me plot the course that took me to that particular road.

"See love, nothing to worry about." Her hands retracted back into the cavernous space of her sleeves. "It's my job, this. Has been for a long time and I do get lonely, you know? I need a little chat now and again, and am getting that and some lovely strong arms to pull me ol' trolley." She flashed her smile.

I wish I could have walked away – said my goodbyes, apologised a bit and then left, and yet I didn't. It would have taken a hard person to just get up and go, and I was finding out I was too kind for my own good.

I smiled. "OK, ten minutes and then I really have to get off, Dolly." I pulled my smile a few notches further. "The missus will have my guts for garters if I don't."

Dolly giggled disturbingly like a little girl, with both her hands covering her mouth. "Guts for garters!" she whispered and then she practically bounded through the front garden of the house we were standing outside.

As she made her way around the house I saw the side entrance round to the back and through this Dolly went. Again the gate gave her no resistance; it opened like she had been expected and as quick as she was before she was back, but this time a black plastic bag held in her hands. As before the trolley bag was opened ever so slightly and in it went.

"One more!" She chirped. "I do like my work, Martin, but I look forward to the end of it as well." She winked at me before taking off on her way to our last stop.

How long was I with that woman? Like most of that night it's blurry and hard to grasp. I feel as if I'm missing important facts. Every time I really try to remember anything it's like having a light shone in my eyes; I can see the edges but not the parts that would make it all clear.

I walked beside her. "How long you been doing this, Dolly?"

"A very long time."

"Good money?" I enquired.

"Umm, not really." She made a show of her battered coat. "Not like I get to wear the finest of things."

I thought of the oldies who delivered papers or worked on tills at supermarkets. "Yeah, it's nice to have something to do. My nan used to volunteer at the hospital. Free of charge, she'd be there giving advice, telling people where to go – think she liked the chat and a cuppa though."

It had fallen quiet for a moment and I felt sure Dolly was mulling something over. I stared at the top of her head and found myself questioning how she walked so fast on what must have been teeny legs. Thankfully we stopped and when I looked around I found myself down a back alley, the type people drive their cars down to get at their garages, and it was dark - thick as soup. All I could see was Dolly and the vaguest hints of shapes around me - someone had thrown a sheet over the moon.

"Last stop," Dolly said simply. "What do you do, Martin?"

I had to think for a moment because the question was so out of the blue. "IT," I managed. "I work at the hospital in the IT department."

She took that in and nodded, it seemed like she had known the answer. "I'm a collector."

Again, I thought I was dealing with a bit of a nut, but I was nearly home dry, so I just nodded.

"Martin." In that dark where I could see nothing else I could somehow see her face; pale and round it became the only light on that night and I was transfixed. Her eyes shone as she spoke. "I don't collect clothes, or the rubbish you don't need no more. I take parts of you and yours," she rested that same finger as before on my chest and I swear my heart froze - stopped beating. "I take from here," the finger rose and then fell above my heart that hid behind flesh and bone that swiftly felt too thin a barrier from the outside. And then the finger rose and tapped my head and again that numbness spread. "And here."

I can say why I didn't run – I was petrified, stuck like a statue in place. This was no little old lady in front of me and can say that now, but at the time I just had the massive wrongness of her settle on me like ash and I stood there as she went on.

"I've been around for a long time, dear, and I have been many places, but I always do the same thing." This time when she smiled it wasn't the same as before; this was a rodent's smile of sharp, yellowing teeth, her lips curling back from the gums ever so slightly. "Everyone wants so much, but you can't have it all and it's my job to nibble bits and pieces to even things out. You all want riches, fame and beauty – now Martin, what would the world be like if that was how it all worked? That bit of luck that doesn't go your way, that's me, that wrong turn you make and that child that suddenly gets sick." Then Dolly had pulled back from me slowly and without looking leaned back on what must have been a gate and sure enough it was and slowly she made her way in. "All me," she said as the gate closed again.

I could not move. I could not even let go of that damn trolley. She was quick as always as soon back plastic bag in hand. When she had packed this away she turned and looked up at me again and it was the face of the woman I had stopped to help. "Well dear, looks like this is it. You've been very nice and really I don't

talk like this to most, but you've been ever so helpful. That trolley does make a racket and it would do me no good if I traipsed through people's houses with it."

She gently unhooked my hands from the handle while I stood there zombie-like and stone-cold sober. "I even did you a favour." Dolly reached up and stroked my cheek. It was like she was stroking a pet. "Bye, bye, deary."

And off she went.

It was only when she was out of sight that I began to move, or, rather, I nearly fell over. The moonlight again broke through the gloom and I looked around. The gate she had last gone through was still open and for a moment I could not understand why I was staring at it. My mind was still trying to figure what exactly had just happened and only when it slowed slightly down I realised where I was - I was outside my own house. Dolly had been in my house.

I almost started crying then and there. I rushed through the gate and found the back door open, waiting for me. I bolted into the front room to find Jenna asleep. I looked at the rise and fall of her chest and then, satisfied, I made my way upstairs and into the kid's bedroom and there they were, both asleep. Matt had his book open across his stomach and Liam snored contentedly, but she had been here and in that room - I could smell that wet dog aroma of hers.

They seem fine, the kids. Both are doing well at school and Jen's got no problems either. So, I can't really say what happened that night – maybe I just got myself scared of a four foot tall old lady, but I don't think so. And now I wonder what it was she took, all scrunched flat and distorted in that plastic bag, and I pray it wasn't much and I hope that all this is pointless and that this story is no more than a bad read. But at night I hear that trolley and I see those eyes and I think it's a warning.

Mark Fletcher
May, 2009

Mark Fletcher is new to the world of fiction writing and this will be his first published piece. After finishing a degree in history, he somehow found himself working with computers. His writing skills honed on the deadly battlefield of technical manuals, he wanted to test himself by writing pieces he would actually enjoy. He currently lives in the UK, Kent, with his fiancée Jenna and their baby boy Thomas.

To Hell

Glynn Barrass

Surrounded by killers, their leader, Ronson, was by far the worst of them. Sitting on a bench in the van's rear, Ronson watched the tall, dark forms of trees flowing past the windscreen as Tove slowly drove them towards the mansion. The van, appropriated by Tove just a few hours earlier, was a flower delivery service, the words 'Belle de jour' painted across each side with an artistic flourish. It'd got them to and past the security station well enough, the guard now dead with his throat slit. Rowley and Bishop, Ronson's very own murderous watchmen, now took his place.

It was six p.m. and already growing dark.

The van stank of fertilizer, interspersed with the less pervasive smell of gun oil. This odor came from Ronson's left; Ingleby hunched forward cleaning his gun with an oily rag whilst the others talked quiet inanities. One of them, possibly Taylor,

though he didn't bother turning to see, lit a cigarette, the sour/sweet smell of tobacco smoke soon replacing all others.

"Is this a shit job or what?" Tove said, the only one of their group dressed like a civilian, albeit wearing a cap bearing the flower shop's logo. The rest of them, as per Ronson's orders, wore black combat fatigues. Tove and the others, mercenaries all, had been picked out personally to join him in traveling all the way to France to murder a physicist and destroy his valuable work. The plan was to raid the mansion in the style of brutal burglars, wrecking the place and killing everyone so as to make it appear like a violent robbery. This wasn't a problem, they'd done it before, albeit for different reasons and across various parts of the globe.

"The job is shit and the wages aren't much better!" He said this to the back of Tove's head, eliciting a laugh from those behind him.

The man they were planning to murder was a brilliantly gifted scientist, rumored to have discovered a new energy source, one that, if brought into use, would be very damaging to the stranglehold Ronson's employers had on the world's economy.

The whys and wherefores didn't matter to Ronson; Black Ops were his career, killing innocents an integral part of it

As the van rumbled onwards, down a road bisecting what must be a veritable forest of hulking trees, the conversation around him soon turned to tales and boasts of past exploits. Keeping his concentration on the road, Ronson wondered just how rich this scientist was to own so many acres of virgin forest.

Rich enough to be robbed and too clever for his own good.

The man was called Beaufort, a bachelor who'd dedicated his life to the pursuit of bettering the planet and the lives of those upon it. Ronson had done a little research on him after taking on the mission, knowing that the man's soon to be snuffed out existence had been a whirlwind of achievements, awards and environmental activism. Beaufort's qualifications in the field of physics and other sciences impressed even Ronson, not a man easily impressed by any sense of the word. He'd make the man's death quick, execution style; anyone else they found, as per orders, would die brutally and messily without the dignity Beaufort would be afforded. If everything went to plan.

Thoughts of planning and tactics were firmly on Ronson's mind when, five minutes later, they finally left the forest, passing between a final clump of trees to reach a large circular clearing centered by a tall structure; Beaufort's mansion. It stood almost grey in the darkening twilight.

"Damn that is a nice place!"

Tove's words brought the others to their feet to crowd up behind Ronson, Taylor making a whistle of admiration as the van slowed to a halt.

Ronson's first thought upon seeing the building was what a tactical nightmare it would be to attack; all the woods, quite easy for concealment, but so full of branches and shrubbery that decent positioning would be extremely difficult to attain. This thought was quickly quashed, his memories of war no use in this current engagement. Instead he took the sight in disregarding his tactician's eye.

Three floors high and dotted with windows, with a marble-pillared entranceway and manicured lawn before it, this resplendent with statues and an ornate fountain, the mansion screamed opulence and expensive taste. No lights were on, quite surprising Ronson considering the hour. His intel reports had already confirmed that the man was home, either asleep or within the lab in the building's cellar; he didn't know. Two small cars were parked ahead of their stopping point, Tove steering the van forward to park neatly beside them.

"Ok, men." Ronson turned to those crouched behind him. "Let's do this thing." A few seconds later and they'd departed the van, checking guns and equipment as Ronson went through a final debriefing. Tove soon joined them at the van's rear, his cap already discarded.

Ronson's orders were plain but brutal.

"You know the drill; go in, sweep each room, and any civilians you find you tie up and drag to the main hall. If any of them give you any shit, kill them where they stand."

Tove and Ingleby nodded grimly, the former raising his hand.

"Yeah, go on." Ronson said.

"Do we take the valuables we find on them?"

Ronson continued. "All jewelry, all money, anything portable and expensive looking, just jam it into your rucksacks. But everyone we find, man woman and child, dies there."

"And any CCTV?" Jacob asked.

"We destroy that if we find it; there's no exterior link and the phone lines have been down since this morning, thanks to our employers. So we all ready?"

Nods and grunts of assent, Taylor taking one last puff on his cigarette before flinging it to the floor, they followed Ronson quietly around the van towards the mansion.

"There's an entranceway at the back which leads to the target's laboratory; we start there and work our way up." He said this feeling a discomfort he didn't want to put into words as he took in the sinister quietude of the building.

Lights out, curtains closed? Even the damn fountain is turned off.

Further musings were ended by Tove's loud retort behind him.

"Hey there's someone under that car!"

Tove, having trailed behind for some reason, was crouched beside the red saloon car that he'd parked next to. As Ronson turned he saw a blonde-haired boy, disheveled and dressed in a pair of dark work overalls, quickly scampering from beneath the car to start running towards the woods. Watching him pant and stamp across the gravel, Ronson thought the boy couldn't be much older than fifteen.

Taylor raised his gun before Ronson sharply ordered him to stop, Ingleby taking the hint and charging after the boy with as much stealth as possible; a gunshot at this moment could have every window in the house illuminated. Ingleby overtook the boy in a matter of seconds, pushing him to the ground with barely a struggle. A few quick movements of his arm, a stifled shriek, and the boy's form went still, Ingleby walking back to them wiping his red-stained blade on his pants.

Ronson led his men towards the house as if nothing untoward had occurred. As he walked, he felt the beginnings of a gentle patter of rain, Ingleby coming up behind him to say, "Place looks dead."

"Could be the power's off," and after a moments reflection, "better for us if it is."

Both sides of the mansion stood flanked by a box-shaped wing of rooms, flat roofed and lined with the ever-present, coldly dead windows; Ronson led them towards the left side whilst searching every closed curtain for movement. A small door at the house's rear, as far as he'd been told, could be used to reach the entrance to the cellar laboratory. They were soon past the partition wing and traipsing across the wet floor of a large, bushy garden area, the now steady rainfall pattering around them as they walked beside the edge of the building. They soon came upon a large greenhouse, jutting out from the mansion's rear wall, it's interior filled with the dark shapes of exotic greenery. Ronson found the door to the cellar a few feet before this glass-formed structure, locked but not for long.

To his surprise, after Ronson had picked the lock he opened the door onto an illuminated flight of steps. *Sign's of life?* He thought as the others joined him, a few of them had been peering into the greenhouse. Guns were checked and Ronson soon had to order everyone to keep it steady; this, their first sign of possible occupancy, had them all excited.

"Stay cool," he said quietly; the stairs were so narrow they had to play 'follow the leader' as he led them to the bowels of the mansion. The stairs were plain and wooden, and appeared way too small to use to cart laboratory equipment down. Ronson assumed that there was another entrance or lift unit leading to it located elsewhere in the house.

The door at the foot of the stairs was a fire door; though the words on it were written in French, a language he didn't speak; he gleaned this just from the shape of it.

"Not much use with the one behind us locked," he muttered.

He could sense his men crowding up behind him despite the close quarters, almost breathing down his neck as he walked the few steps to the door. The lightswitch beside the door had a weird little grid jutting out from it; he switched it off to shroud them all in darkness. Wedging the door open revealed a large, well-lit room, obviously the laboratory; it bore tables covered in scientific

equipment, with some device emitting a quiet, vibrating hum at its center.

Ronson's gun found no target to fire upon, Taylor behind him making a disappointed 'tut' at this utter dearth of activity. The lab, its walls lined with worktops and shelving units piled up with, to Ronson at least, quite esoteric equipment, was white from floor to ceiling with over half a dozen wooden tables lined up across its floor. The machine at the lab's center, an object of odd outlines and construction, would've commanded his attention more if not for the shapes visible atop the tables surrounding it.

"Are they what I think they are?" Jacob said, coming up beside him.

Ingleby joined him on the right, saying, "Damned straight."

From their shape, the objects covering the tables appeared to be almost certainly corpses, covered from head to toe in white linen sheets. So Ronson supposed as he walked towards the closest, the others fanning out behind him as he pushed his gun back into its holster.

It appeared their job had already been done for them.

This was his thought up until the moment that Taylor, preempting him and reaching over to the nearest table, pulled the sheet away to reveal the face beneath. Ronson's men, usually deporting themselves in an efficient manner despite the adversities that they faced in their unique and grisly line of work, jointly exclaimed in shock at the identity of the corpse Taylor revealed beneath the white sheet.

Ronson had to look twice before what he was seeing finally sank in.

It was Rowley, who should have been guarding the gatehouse but was instead here, laid out cold and supine, his head shaved and his eyes closed as if he'd been dead for hours.

Taylor, having now backed away, kept repeating the word 'shit' in a slow and steady mantra of surprise. Ronson, retrieving the Browning automatic from his belt, stepped closer to the spot that the others were crowding round. Pushing between Tove and Jacob, he looked down at what was undoubtedly Rowley's corpse; pulling the sheet away fully, he found he could see no sign of apparent injury, nothing except a 'Y'-shaped stitch mark across the chest; the evidence of an earlier autopsy.

"This is way too many shades of wrong shit." Jacob said.

"No kidding," came Ronson's reply.

Taylor had stopped swearing and had begun tearing away the remaining sheets, madly dragging them to the floor to reveal the other corpses. Ronson had already counted that there were seven, seven shrouds for seven corpses on the seven tables surrounding the bizarre piece of machinery that still kept trying to hold his attention despite what they'd just discovered. The tables, like the slabs in a morgue, had been set in two rows of three, with the single, lone block of wood at the forefront bearing Rowley's limp form; Taylor had been quite the flurry of action as he'd darted between them, the grim set of his face going as slack as Rowley's soon after he'd exposed the other dead forms. Ronson and the others were awed into silence, only Ingleby making a sound in the form of a strangled, choking moan.

Ronson's assumption that Rowley had been murdered and mysteriously transported to the lab now came to naught, for as well as the bodies of Rowley *and* Bishop, pale and dead with their heads shaved in the laboratory turned morgue, there lay their own lifeless twins. It would've been better, far better if they'd just found those two dead on the tables before them; at least that could've brought some kind of plausible explanation.

"So we're dead, right?" Taylor was giggling, his face glossy with perspiration.

Apart from himself and Taylor, each man had moved around to stare down at their doubles. Ronson, mere feet away from his own doppelganger, was attempting to keep his mind steady in the face of this utterly insane discovery.

Silence, exclamations of awe, and then Tove said: "This scientist, and this energy source? It must be something to do with time travel, right?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jacob said this, leaning over his dead counterpart and examining the scarred wounds across its chest.

"What other explanation can there be?" Tove left the corpses, stepping towards the weird, gently humming machine behind them. "This device here, it must take us back in time at some point; we die, *and here we are dead!*"

Taylor laughed and swore at him, Jacob adding, "Time travel doesn't exist, I don't care what this shit is."

Ingleby, silent until now, slammed a fist onto his table, staring round with panic in his eyes. "We gotta leave!" he exclaimed. "Whatever's going on here is messed up and *wrong*."

The man's fear was palpable, Ronson could see the situation rapidly degrading into utter chaos; he could feel the panic growing in his own mind like a cancerous tumor. Taylor looked frantic, Tove ready to punch him, and the situation had to be dealt with sooner rather than later. The fear he swallowed before speaking fell down his throat like a boulder.

"Look everyone," he said, keeping his voice low and calm. "This could be some kind of dupe. Maybe Beaufort has someone working for him linked to the Company, and they mocked up these corpses to look like us." It was a shit theory and he knew it, but it also sounded like the only plausible explanation.

"Thank God for logic!" Jacob said.

On a roll now, Ronson continued, "cover these things up and get your minds on the mission." Looking down at Rowley's corpse, he said, "Give me a second."

Taylor started picking up the white sheets, Ingleby helping him.

Removing the radio from his belt, Ronson keyed in Bishop's number, raising his finger to his lips for silence as the device crackled and connected.

"Bishop, what's the score?" Silence, then static, then the man's voice came loud and clear.

"Everything's fine here sir, but it's coming down in buckets outside."

"Right, right," he replied. "Rowley there?"

A barely audible mutter, then, "you want to speak to him?"

Ronson stared round at his group and decided to end the useless conversation. "No that's ok, stay tight there, everything's clockwork here."

The voice at the other end said, "roger," and Ronson cut him off. Placing the radio back in his belt he looked around at his men. While he'd been talking, the corpses had all been covered back up, all to a man looking at him eagerly, apart from Tove, who was

still examining the machine that Ronson suspected was the scientist's new invention.

"So?" Ingleby asked, "What now?"

"We continue as before: we split up and find our victims." Ronson paused for a moment, finally deciding to go and examine his own dead double. Walking towards it, he said, "Anyone you find, you pump them for information about this mess. You do whatever it takes."

Pulling the sheet from the corpse's head, he stared down at what appeared to be his complete mirror image.

Plastic surgery on a dead body just to freak us out? It sounded stupid. If Beaufort knew that they were coming, why not just call the authorities?

Leaving the table, he stepped towards Tove, on his knees examining the machine. Jacob squeezed between the tables to join him; turning to Jacob, Ronson asked, "You know what this thing is?"

To Ronson, the machine, a grey, barrel-shaped cylinder with miscellaneous grids of mesh embedded in its surface, looked a complete mystery. Reaching up to the ceiling, the top of the thing tapered off into a spider's web of tubes disappearing into the square white tiles; the bottom was a starfish-like configuration with thicker, insulated tubes sloping down into the floor.

Jacob, walking to the other side of the machine, said, "There's a bank of computers here sir, I think they operate it."

Ronson turned to check on the other men, thankfully now wandering around the room and examining the equipment lined up against the walls. Only Ingleby appeared disturbed; he kept looking over at the shrouded bodies with quick, nervous glances.

We need to leave this room and forget about all this for now, he thought, stepping round the machine's grey bulk, *get our minds focused elsewhere.*

As Jacob had said, a smaller table sat behind the machine, bearing a row of shiny black, rectangular boxes. A keyboard and an LCD screen fronted these, Jacob examining them as Ronson leant behind him. The screen was covered in gibberish, archaic looking symbols, falling down it like a fountain. Ronson was about to question Jacob on these when the man pressed a key, making the screen turn blank, a small, green '>' symbol flashing at its apex.

"Matrix screensaver," Jacob explained, nodding towards the barrel-shaped machine. "I wouldn't know where to start, ordering that thing what to do."

"Hey can we open one of these up?" Taylor's voice; he was back looking at the corpses.

"What the hell for?" this from Tove, standing up to face Taylor with an angry stance; *time for a move*, Ronson thought, realizing the bodies' proximity was still causing dissention.

A grim determination began to grow in his mind. *I'll find the answers and burn this damned place to ashes.*

Stopping the impending argument with a shout, all heads turned to him as he began to bark out his orders.

Ω

As commanders went, at times Ronson *could* be a right bastard, but not the worst he'd had over him. This was Taylor's thought after their leader had shouted him out before the others.

Damn, all I wanted to do was take a look inside Tove's dead belly! He grinned at this thought, as morbid as it was. But really, Ronson had only had their best interests at heart when he'd ordered them out of the cellar to set them to task searching the remainder of the mansion.

Jacob had been left downstairs, *with* the corpses, to spend his time destroying all of the computers there *(lucky him!),* with Ronson and Ingleby going upstairs to check out the other floors. He and Tove had been given the ground floor between them, and after the four had left Jacob to climb a new staircase, that one leading up to a quite extravagant entrance hall, he'd made a bored and halfhearted search of the east wing before returning to the main hall.

All he'd discovered for his trouble were empty guest rooms and a small pantry; had helped himself to a big chunk of sausage hanging off of the pantry ceiling before returning to their orientation point. Dark oak walls, crystal chandeliers, and a chessboard marble floor surrounded him now; despite the fact he'd been exploring the mansion in darkness, everything was visible by the subdued window light filtering in from the darkening skies beyond.

Without bothering to wait for Tove, or contacting the others, he decided to search the rest of the ground floor on his own, the only place remaining being whatever lay beyond the door lying a half dozen feet before him.

He soon discovered that this room, situated beneath the balcony, was a dining room. Taylor knew this without needing to use his torch as a door on its far right stood slightly ajar, with light filtering in from beyond. Light… and he licked his lips at this, the sound of voices.

Taking his time, he stepped around the dining table, first walking around the left hand side of the room and discovering another door, this one closed and facing the other. He approached it slowly, relishing in the anticipation that he'd soon have some residents to terrorize. This door led into darkness, smelling strongly of dust and mothballs.

Probably a closet, he thought, leaving it open as he turned towards the other doorway. He was only halfway there when he found that the sounds beyond appeared to be sex sounds. This revelation made him smile; there was no end of fun to be found through this door.

The room was a kitchen, brightly lit and painted in white, its walls lined with a large variety of cookery equipment and regalia. And the sounds? A couple was laid copulating across the floor tiles, just in front of a row of cabinets almost halving the room. Both were naked, the man straddling the woman, thrusting and making muffled moans as the woman, legs spread, gyrated beneath him uttering her own sounds of pleasure.

Taylor could smell the sex on them, a thick miasma of musk and body odor.

He made his footsteps overly loud as he strode towards them, trying to catch their attention but failing miserably. This made him smile, they were obviously too engrossed in the act to notice him.

And who wouldn't be? He thought, reaching to unzip his pants. *The man will die and the woman will suffer.*

Cocking his pistol didn't cause them to pause, so he stepped over to kick the man from his moaning playmate.

"You gotta move over fella, it's my time to play." He now stood directly over them, noticing the sheens of sweat soaking the man's buttocks and puddling up beneath the two.

They must have been at this for hours!

So unnoticed did he feel that he crouched down to get a closer look at their faces; the wrongness he found there caused him to shriek aloud.

Ω

Ingleby found no need for a light source either as he searched the top floor, for although unseen from outside the mansion, the roof of the structure bore a huge glass skylight peering up to the heavens above. Hollow and spacious, the whole floor was one big library, tall bookshelves lining every wall with a row of wide desks along its center. Walking around these, occasionally using his torch to check beneath them, he stared at the obvious lack of hiding places before planting himself down onto one of the many plush seats surrounding the desks. Placing his gun and torch atop the desk, he leaned over to switch on one of the green shaded reading lamps.

The illumination was small but more than enough to read by, his intention until he discovered that the titles of the books lying on the desk were in French and by their covers, boring technical manuals of some sort. After a few minutes of taking it easy, doing and thinking nothing in particular, he observed a black shape passing over the desk, making him think a cloud formation had floated across the skylight. Looking up, he found the sky empty of clouds, and a sudden thought occurred to him: *where's the rain gone?*

The skylight was dry, making him feel a confusion that was quickly replaced by another, more frightening emotion as that innocuous, dark shadow returned.

Ω

In the minutes since the others had left, Jacob had busied himself removing the cases from the computers using the screwdriver from his kit, his other tools draped across the keypad in a canvas holder, ready to use if needed. With the guts of the

computers now revealed, he could gain access to the hard drives and wipe them using the portable magnetic field emitter he had in his rucksack.

Bending down to delve into the rucksack, he pulled back the flap, digging down for the emitter. The rucksack also contained explosives, usually a last resort in his line of work, but with that unknown grey machine looming before him he felt quite sure that Ronson would allow him to blow the damned thing up once they were finished scouring the mansion for victims.

The thought of destroying the lab and its collection of mysterious corpses, so close that he could smell their dead flesh, made him feel good inside. Finding the magnetic device, he stood back up, switching it on so that its hum joined that of the machines behind the disassembled computers.

He started humming a tune himself as he ran the device up and down the nearest hard disc, stopping when he heard the door to his right open.

Must be one of the guys come back to tell me something, he thought, hearing the slap of footsteps against the lab's tiles. Looking up as his visitor's shadow fell across the table, he found it was not one of Ronson's team standing over him but his own naked corpse, its eyes open with a sneering grin animating its deathly pale face.

He went to punch it in the mouth but was far too slow, his corpse double grabbing hold of his throat with lightening speed. He dropped the field emitter to the floor as he reached up to thwart his attacker's strangling hold, his arms filling with goosebumps as he clasped hold of its cold, dead flesh. Jacob hacked and choked as his throat was crushed, died a moment later when the top of his spine was squeezed into tiny fragments.

Ω

The rooms of the west wing had been devoid of live *and* dead bodies thankfully; Tove had shone his torch in over a dozen bleak rooms, discovering nothing of note. He'd recognized nothing of value to take away, either.

"What the hell do I know about antiques or valuables?" he said to himself, entering the main hall again. He flashed his torch around a little, glancing up at the two staircases with quiet

admiration, then a growing feeling of disgust at what the stairway below the balcony led to.

"Crazy damn place," he said, looking towards that door, then he noticed that the door to its right was open.

Did Taylor go in there? He wondered, heading towards it; the man *was* meant to be checking the east wing, but that door hadn't been open when they'd first started their explorations.

A few dozen steps brought him to the door; there was some light within but not enough for his poor eyesight. Moving the torch around soon informed him that it held a large, varnished dinner table resplendent with silver or gold candlesticks.

I could take those, at a pinch.

Two doors stood at either side of the room, both open but only the one on the right lit from within. The back of the room was centered by a huge fireplace, a painting above it displaying an image of men on horses partaking in some kind of hunt.

The sounds he heard made him head towards the doorway on the right. The noises became clearly those of sex as he got halfway across the room; he pulled the gun from his holster just in case.

As he entered, his first thought was that Taylor had found himself a victim. Seeing that the man screwing the woman had red hair corrected this assumption, but just before them lay a small object that was almost definitely one of his comrades' firearms. This made him step more carefully, pointing his own gun towards the couple in case of an ambush. Tove soon realized he need not worry; the two were far too engrossed in their frantic copulation to notice his presence.

Still, he bent down to retrieve the gun upon reaching them, rather safe than sorry being his motto in situations like this. The two lovers stank of sweat and sex, utterly oblivious to his presence as he tucked the new gun into his belt. It took him no more than a glance to realize that there was something very odd about the man and woman.

"What the?" His loud voice didn't distract them from their lovemaking, his surprise soon turning to quiet disgust as he saw that not only were they linked together in the obvious sense, they were joined at their lips and chests in a Siamese twin-like configuration. Moaning with pleasure, their lips were joined up in a perfect seal.

The woman's sweating breasts seemed to be growing into the man's chest; Tove felt such disgust at the sight that he didn't bother examining them any further.

"Those two are well and truly screwed." The unintended pun went straight over his head. A second later and a noise from the other side of the room captured his attention, a clattering of pots and a quiet laughter that sounded like Taylor's voice.

Still pointing his pistol at the squirming creature beneath him, he shouted the man, noticing that the noise had come from just beyond the row of worktops flanking the kitchen's center.

"Hey Taylor, what's up, you hiding there?"

More clattering - metallic noises reaching his ears in a loud jumble, and then a hunched shape slowly strode from behind the partition.

"Son of a bitch!"

What Tove had assumed was Taylor, rummaging around the back of the kitchen for whatever unknown reason, waddled forward in the form of a shriveled, deformed little creature. It *was* Taylor, in a way, but Taylor shrunken down to less that half his former height. Twisted and naked, his arms dangling down to the floor, his head appeared far too large for the skinny pipe of a neck it bobbed atop. The metallic sounds came from the chains attached to his stunted body, one dangling from his genitals and trailing off between his legs, the testes red and diseased looking; the other chain was embedded in Taylor's forehead, dragging the skin of his face up and backwards as it draped off behind him. It gave him an evil, elfin look.

Tove backed away, saying: "What the hell is going on here?" The miniature deformity stumbling towards him with a slow but careful gait. Tove was about to speak again when a far larger shape loomed up from behind the worktops, doubling his horror at the sight of Taylor's impossible alterations. The chains were attached to this new horror, an obesely massive, naked woman, barely able to move on sagging legs the width of barrels. A huge belly hung to the floor before her, pendulous veiny breasts hanging above its greasy bulk. The nipples of these, inches long and gnarled like twigs, bore the chains holding Taylor.

The woman's face was bloated and sagging; her whole fleshy form wobbling gruesomely as she trailed behind her charge.

Grabbing Tove's attention, the deformed version of Taylor said almost gleefully, "I deeply and profoundly accept myself," the teeth in his gummy, mocking mouth appearing small and unformed.

Tove pointed his gun at Taylor's face and began pulling the trigger. Empty clicks followed.

Ω

The room had turned to darkness, a deep, infinite night as if all the lights in the universe had been suddenly snuffed out. Nothing, not his hands before him or the desk beneath them or the shelves around him were visible in this nothingness. Ingleby was about to get up from his seat to investigate when something firm but gentle pulled him up by his armpits. He felt his feet knock his chair away but no sound followed, and then the most excruciating pain as something sharp and heavy sliced away his legs just above the knees. The pain sent shocks of lightning through his body, burning through his nerve endings in a crescendo of agony.

No sounds came as he screamed and struggled; noise, like the light, had been banished; there was only room for pain in this new dimension that he found himself within. Something long and metallic tasting twisted into his mouth, shattering teeth and lacerating his tongue to shreds. Shuddering and bleeding, he felt this massive drill start to turn and dig deeper and he really did believe that his nightmare of pain just couldn't get any worse. He was right, for as his arms were detached and four sharp, unseen objects began twisting into his dripping sockets, he discovered that he'd gone far beyond anything like that simple, human term called agony.

Ω

Unaware of the hell his men were discovering, Ronson searched the first floor with the ugly thought of the bodies in the cellar never far from his mind. After setting the other men to task, he and Ingleby had walked up one of the ornate flights of stairs to cross the balcony and enter a short corridor leading to a row of doors that he'd assumed were probably bedrooms. Ending at the right of this corridor had been another staircase that Ingleby had headed towards to reach the upper floor.

Ronson's prediction about the rooms had been correct; he'd examined all three, the one beside the staircase onwards, finding nothing but large and sparse bedrooms, devoid of any signs of life. It seemed like far too large a building for a single man to own; but what did Ronson know? Back in England, he and his wife shared nothing more than a two bedroomed semi.

Wanting to retain the element of surprise meant that he didn't use his torch unless absolutely necessary, not too good in the blackness at the end of the corridor, but he would manage. The door before him now, at the opposite end of the stairs Ingleby had taken and almost completely shrouded in darkness, held a new interest because a few moments earlier he'd been sure that he'd heard a noise from behind it.

And any noise was better than the bleak silence of the dead.

He pulled the Browning from his belt as he turned the handle, the door resisting a little before creaking open. Entering slowly, he discovered that although the curtains were closed, enough light filtered in to at least partially illuminate the room. It was large and spacious, lined by the nebulous shapes of unknown furniture. Smelling strongly of tobacco smoke, its center was taken up by the large, pale shape of a double bed. The thick carpet beneath his boots drowned the noise he made as he stepped in further, the steady patter of rainfall coming loudly from the window across the room.

A sound like the shuffling of leaves followed by a low cough convinced him that he was not alone; it came from the bed. As he approached, a hoarse, slightly accented voice said, "You have come to kill me, yes? Don't lie, I can see the gun in your hand."

Ronson retreated a few steps to close the door behind him, his eyes quickly adjusting to the darkness as he made his way back towards the bed.

It bore a small, hunched shape, the head barely visible atop the bed's white sheets; the man made a few hacking coughs as Ronson reached him; a dark blob of a head juddered atop a pale white pillow.

"Killing you was the plan; now things are a little different."

Ronson stood now at the side of the bed, discerning the dim features of a wrinkled, hook-nosed visage. It was without a doubt Beaufort, albeit more frail and haggard looking than the

picture he'd seen in the mission dossier. The man's legs were pulled up, creating a large white hump beneath the sheets; his legs, like the rest of his body, spasmed as he coughed and retched.

"You couldn't pass me the bag on the table, could you?" he asked, producing a thin, pale hand from beneath the sheets, Ronson watched him feebly point towards the table on his right.

Ronson said, "tell me what's going on here," before stepping over to the table.

"Just give me a minute," Beaufort continued, going into a fit of painful sounding coughs.

Ronson poked around the table surface, whereupon sat a lamp and a silent, old-fashioned, bell alarm clock. He found the bag, white and wrinkled, and whilst retrieving it he went to switch on the lamp, its side bearing the same tacked-on box he'd seen on other switches around the house.

"Please don't do that," Beaufort said, his voice back but sick and liquid sounding. Ronson obeyed, raising the bag to his nose to discover that it held mints or cough sweets. He passed it to Beaufort and waited whilst the man fumbled around with it, placing a piece of its contents into his mouth. Ronson waited impatiently whilst the other made loud, sucking sounds.

"Sorry, sorry," Beaufort said. "It is an awful world in which a condemned man has to die with a cold on his chest."

"As I was saying, I came to kill you but now I'm intrigued."

"About the dreadful objects downstairs, or the thing in the attic?"

Ronson felt a coldness trickle down his spine; ignoring it, he said, "By objects I suppose you mean the corpses of me and my men. You need to explain."

Beaufort chuckled wetly. "You have seen the machine in my lab, yes?"

"The new energy source." Ronson replied.

"You sound like an intelligent man," Beaufort continued. "What do you know of bioelectromagnetism?"

"The electromagnetic fields living organisms produce," came Ronson's reply.

"I'm so glad you're the one to finish me off," Beaufort said between sucks.

Getting impatient again, Ronson raised his voice, "*the corpses, tell me now!*"

"Yes of course, but it's all an interconnected tapestry," Beaufort said coolly, crunching then swallowing whatever was in his mouth. He continued in a slow, mellow voice. "Did you know that the internal electrical fields within a human body are more powerful than a lightening bolt? Harness that energy and you can power everything you desire with the touch of a switch." He beckoned towards the lamp.

"Those that hired me to kill you didn't like that idea."

Another chuckle from Beaufort, drier, less liquid. "Yes, but what I didn't know, in my naiveté, was that there is much more to bioelectricity than mere electric currents and cell potential."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, my young assassin, that my dreams of people operating motor vehicles with the energy from their own bodies, or utilizing bioelectrics to fully power a house or workplace have come to naught. How was I to know that the enhancements my machine cause also enhance the psychic residue bound into that energy, creating physical manifestations quite horrible to behold."

It sounded impossible, what the croaking man was saying, but Ronson's own explanation for the dead duplicates hadn't been that plausible either.

"So we created those corpses out of our own heads?"

"Yes," Beaufort continued, "as my machine in the basement draws in and reuses your inbuilt electricity, it also enhances your deepest, darkest subconscious thoughts. He laughed again, a cold, rattling sound. "It's a shame we're such a blighted species. It must be having a field day with you and your fellow killers!"

Ronson literally spat in anger. "Damn you, you're just full of it!"

He'd had enough of Beaufort's pained voice and esoteric explanations. He was about to turn back when a surprisingly strong hand grabbed hold of his wrist.

"The house is full of devices powered by my machine," Beaufort said, "heaven help any of your men if they even so much as switch on a light."

Ronson retrieved his hand with a struggle, pointing towards the man's forehead with the other and pressing his gun down against pale, dry flesh.

"Just turn off the power and you may well leave here with your mind and body intact." Saying this Beaufort lifted his head, pushing it up against the gun. "If you can survive the manifestations your colleagues minds have created on the way."

"I'll take my chances," Ronson said, turning away from him. Killing Beaufort was no longer an issue, getting his men and leaving being his only imperative now.

Beaufort stopped him from leaving with an unusual request. "You really have to kill me. Please! Just give me a moment and I'll show you why…"

Ronson didn't raise his gun again, just backed off a little to safely discern what the man would do next. Not knowing what to expect, it came as a surprise when Beaufort proceeded to drag his bed sheet away, dragging it slowly first before pulling it aside to reveal his naked body beneath.

Ronson stepped back further; the view of Beaufort's body was startling in the extreme.

Everything from his crotch upwards appeared like that of a normal, elderly man's, but the bulbous lump that Ronson had assumed had been nothing more than Beaufort's drawn up legs, was in fact a massive and swollen scrotal sack, assuming the place of his legs and pulsing hugely above the clean white mattress. Covered in thick black hairs, veins the width of fingers were visible beneath the thickly wrinkled skin. What might've been an array of tiny human feet appeared to line the bottom of that elephantine blob; it was a little too messy down there to be sure.

It was Beaufort who spoke first, breaking the silence with another of his obnoxiously dry chuckles. The rough laughter stopped but he continued to smile as he addressed Ronson's disgusted but unspoken question.

"My machine was in full operation barely two days before this happened to me." He slapped the sides of his mutant genitals; they sloshed like bags of puss. "My servants have either fled or been killed by their own disturbed psyches, I suppose."

This made Ronson recall the boy he'd allowed Ingleby to murder, a sudden regret quickly quashed by the deformed creature the scientist had become.

"The power is like a sponge, retaining the flavor of our deepest darkness," Beaufort said. "I wonder what it will do to you?"

Ronson replied by aiming his gun, pointing it towards Beaufort's grimly smiling face. That face showed relief as Ronson fired and fired again.

Ω

The sounds of gunfire awoke Ingleby from his stupor. He found himself sprawled across the library's reading tables with the lamps bent and smashed beneath him. He knew all of this despite the fact that his eyes were gone, for he could now see all from a different, inner sight never before used by the human species.

Loudly snarling from his reformed mouth and vocal organs, Ingleby raised himself on twisted legs almost the length of streetlights.

It was time to investigate the gunfire.

Ω

The experience should've disturbed him, or at least been cause for contemplation, but made from sterner stuff, Ronson's first action upon leaving the room was to key in Jacob's number on the radio. The man was quick to reply. Ronson, slowly walking down the dark corridor towards the staircase, kept his voice quiet in case any of the doctor's 'manifestations' were abroad.

"Yeah?" Came Jacob's voice, quiet and tinny in his ear.

"How goes it down there?"

"Not too bad, sir."

Ronson tutted down the mouthpiece; "Don't call me sir."

"Sorry," Jacob replied. "Anyway, I have the computers busted and the hard drives wiped."

"That's good," Ronson nodded to himself. "Those bodies bugging you?"

A pause, then, "No, not really."

"Could you do me a favor and have a look at that machine." Ronson stopped at the staircase, adding, "and have a look for an off switch?"

"Sure, sure," came the reply, "I'm just near there now."

There was silence, and then, "Good luck turning this thing off, I wouldn't know where to start. And one more thing…"

"Yeah, what is it?"

Jacob's voice, although distant, had begun to subtly change, becoming deeper, more menacing. "All of these dead bodies here, sir… well, they all seem to look like you now. *How about that?"*

The line went dead; Ronson felt glad of it, for the man downstairs was quite certainly no longer Jacob.

Attempting to contact the others came to no avail, his idea of just regrouping his men on the ground floor and leaving dissipating to naught as he paused for thought before the stairs. Jacob had been down there with the lights on for quite a while now; helping to power the lab (*did it also store energy?*) with his own tainted internal energy source. If he and the others had caused the materialization of their own dead bodies in the first few seconds they'd been there, who knew what might have happened in the time Jacob had been there alone? Had the others switched on the lights and fallen, or been taken by those deformed like Beaufort? He stepped towards the wall and crouched down, attempting gather his thoughts.

Is it possible that this power can be manipulated? If it comes from us, then why can't we control what is created?

This was something that the creator could probably explain, could have, if Ronson hadn't already half-atomized the man's skull. Knowing that his curiosity may well prove his undoing, Ronson stood, heading towards the nearest door, entering and pausing momentarily beside the altered light switch. Flicking it on would be a mistake but he did it anyway.

The room was as he'd first seen it, albeit brightly lit with the shadows now dispersed. Decorated in beige and yellow, it was as innocent as a room could be; he stared round wondering at the truth of Beaufort's words.

The thing appeared in the form of a floating, bobbing facsimile of his wife's head, sans her mouth, staring blandly at him

from just above eye level. He shot it in the forehead and quickly switched off the light.

It is true, all of it!

He took a few deep breaths before looking down to where it'd fallen.

It was still there, slowly puddling blood into the bed sheets. Killing the things obviously didn't make them disappear, but he should've known that from what he'd done to Beaufort.

Feeling his heart beat faster, he began taking in more deep breaths, thinking, *so I can make something appear just by my proximity to the power interface, and that thing must have come straight from my own brain. He brushed the light switch lightly with the tip of the Browning's muzzle. But what if I concentrate, really picture something in my head, what'll happen then?*

Ronson closed his eyes, concentrating his mind on an image of a bunch of bananas, his imagination not stretching to much else. He kept the image strongly in his thoughts as he flicked on the light switch.

The room stood empty, the pitiful shape of his wife's broken head lying forlorn and bloody on the bed. A few moments later and his 'thought' manifested itself in the form of a massive, squamous mass of claws and flesh, covered in greasy fur. He darted from the room without firing a shot, slamming the door shut and shoving his hand over his mouth as his stomach convulsed and his throat gagged.

Running for the staircase with his eyes streaming, he only paused when it became apparent that the thing he'd invoked was not pursuing him. Standing on the landing now, he realized with bare effort that the power was not to be trifled with.

He now found himself at a crossroads: whether to go upstairs to try and find Ingleby or cut his losses and just set off for the ground floor; not that this meant that he would come any closer to finding the others, but it was possible that they might have grouped together on the ground floor.

He stared up briefly at the staircase leading up to wherever Ingleby had got to. The thought occurred to him that perhaps now might be the right time to contact his men over at the guard post, to inform them that the mission was over. Keying in the code for Rowley, he'd just lifted the radio to his ear when a sudden, jarring pain stabbed him in the hand, knocking him to the floor in a flailing

heap. Something in the darkness above had jabbed down at him with a powerful thrust. His hand burned like hell, and the blow would've probably fractured his skull if this and the now missing radio hadn't been blocking the object's path. His ear ached horribly from the impact regardless, and he felt a brief nausea as he shuffled up to his knees, pulling himself together to search for a target. He pointed his gun upwards as he climbed to his feet, for a large, dark shape seemed to be lurking in the shadows near the top of the staircase.

"Halt, who goes there?" He rubbed his ear trying to put some life back into it; then the lights came on and any tiny assumption that a human had attacked him disappeared as the spider-shaped thing on the stairs came into full view.

Ingleby, or part of him at least, hung in the air glaring down at Ronson from jagged, empty eye sockets, his torso attached to a new set of arms and legs formed into long, many-jointed metallic legs. These limbs grew out of the hacked-off stumps of his original body parts, his upper legs twisted forward to give him a looming, quadrupedal look. Slowly rocking back and forth, Ingleby looked like nothing other than a big, skinny, mutilated insect constructed from flesh and steel.

"What the hell happened to you?" The words came from Ronson's mouth in a shocked whisper.

He would've considered it possible that this new version of Ingleby had been formed and dragged from his own psyche if the lights hadn't been out when he'd had the other on his mind. But whatever had happened to Ingleby, Ronson's only responsibility now was to either stop the creature or escape.

More grisly alterations became apparent as Ingleby opened his mouth, hissing loudly from toothless, blood red gums; his ruined tongue lolled out from that spitting orifice like a mass of ripped and tattered purple worms. His blinded dead eyes still seemed to exude hatred as he bore down upon Ronson, stilted legs tottering him down as his hisses became a roar.

Ronson's shoulders hit the wall before he took aim; he hadn't even been conscious that he'd *been* backing away. Then the narrow space around him filled with thunder as he shot at Ingleby's towering form, the first bullet taking away Ingleby's chin and lower jaw, turning the roar into a noxious, wet gargle. The second and

third shot put holes through his chest, pausing him but by no means making him fall. Ronson had to duck as Ingleby swung a front leg at his head, smashing and showering chunks of wall plaster over him as he spun and rolled towards the stairs to the ground floor. He was about to turn and take another shot when a thick steel leg smashed through the floor beside his face. Curling up into a ball, he rolled down the stairs to try and gain a safe distance between him and his attacker. Up and back on his feet in seconds, he aimed squarely at the man turned monster's face and pulled the trigger until the clip clicked empty and a headless torso was all that remained of Ingleby. The thing still stood though, dripping blood and swaying atop its long legs only feet above him; then the legs started to bend and twist and the whole demented structure began to totter down towards him. Ronson was away before it struck, charging towards the door beyond the stairs as Ingleby clattered limply to the floor. Moments later and he was through that door to unknown places, flicking off the light switch and leaving the stairs in darkness before he slammed it tightly behind him.

Sweat soaked his brow and body; it wetted the pit of his back as he panted from the exhilaration of the chase. Pausing for breath, he replaced the clip in the Browning before turning back to door. Pulling it open an inch or two, he held his breath whilst pushing the gun barrel into the gap; hearing nothing but silence beyond he closed the door and started breathing again.

"So you bastard things *do* die," he whispered, leaning back against the door and wiping his coat sleeve across his forehead; he knew now that it was definitely time to cut his losses and leave.

The door he'd just used had opened out onto the east wing corridor, the large window facing him making the space around him bleak and grey. Beyond the glass the rain poured with incessant abandon. He was briefly tempted to leave by the window, before deciding to check the main hall on the off chance that someone else had survived. Heading towards the door with his gun raised, he remembered he'd left his radio upstairs but didn't feel it prudent that he go back and retrieve it.

Ronson turned the handle, the opened door filling his eyes with illumination; he was about to close it and back off when he noticed that Tove was standing in the room. The man looked pale

and sickly, but he bore no uncanny alterations and was undoubtedly alive.

Getting out with one man still breathing was good enough for Ronson.

Closing the door, he searched the wall for a light switch. No dice.

"Hey Tove, you ready to go?" He said this whilst walking slowly forward, hesitant as the wall on his right obscured the rest of the main hall. Past this in moments, he looked up at the sparkling chandeliers with disquiet. As far as he was concerned, the light meant madness and monsters. His advance towards Tove was soon halted as he examined the rest of the room, for the madness *and* the monsters were already present.

Tove, a bare foot away from the outer doors and safety, stood stiffly, almost dummy-like, blandly facing the horrors Ronson had just discovered. Ronson would've rather not looked at them if he could help it, for as well as the horrible, human-shaped creature near the center of the room, its architecture had been warped in a quite substantial way.

His gun he pointed at the one living threat, a massive, abnormally large woman whose face and head reminded him of a sweaty, pink-skinned version of Jabba the Hutt. She, or it, rather, stared grinning from beneath thick folds of flesh hanging down over her eyes and mouth; her hair, long, dark and frizzy, falling down around a pair of huge, saggy shoulders. Her right breast, flaccidly hanging down her belly, was missing the nipple and dripped blood, the other attached to a thick, rusty chain trailing off behind her.

In a high-pitched, lusty voice, she said, "J'ai une enflure!" and giggled loudly, using a big doughy hand to tug the chain forward. The object at the end of the chain came across the tiles roughly, in a streak of blood. Trailing that gore was a shriveled humanoid form, curled in a fetal position and soaked in red. It twitched but did not struggle.

Ronson's disgust at this sight didn't parallel the aversion he felt towards the circular doorway that Tove faced. Formed from the space where the door to the cellar and the balcony had once been, it was a dank, looming hole leading to pure darkness, ceiling high and surrounded by a frame of thick, wriggling, maggot-like things. The

light filling the room, as bright as it was, didn't touch that obsidian blackness, the unknown spaces beyond denying the light and exuding an evil almost palpable.

Ronson edged closer to the wall as he bridged the gap between himself and Tove.

He stepped warily, but the woman made no move to approach, instead she stared at him with an ugly glee as he tapped Tove on the shoulder.

With no response from either the touch or words, he was about to shake the man when Tove, slowly and quietly, began to speak.

"Its our final creation," he said, nodding his head as he continued to stare into the void. "The entrance to Hell." His eyes seemed transfixed on some invisible, far away scene.

"Tove… man, we need to get out of here." This time he *did* grab hold of Tove, attempting to shake him back to reality. The doorway was fast becoming a far stronger presence in the room; Ronson could feel it in the corner of his vision, as if the abyss beyond was staring back at him.

Tove stood as stolid and unyielding as a tree; he spoke again, even slower this time.

"The Devil is there, waiting to greet you." He turned to face Ronson, his breath warm and sour as he gaped through and beyond him. "You should go, face your destiny; everyone else is waiting in there for you."

The woman started tittering again, Ronson turning to see that she now cradled the diminutive creature in her flabby arms, the chain traipsing behind her like a tail. She was heading towards the doorway with her deformed backside almost touching the floor. He saw now that the bloody, scrunched up face of her dripping charge closely resembled that of Taylor's.

A moment later and Tove began walking towards the door himself, Ronson grabbing him only to be quickly shrugged off.

"The door only appeared when *you* came in," Tove said; he walked stiffly, like a man marching on parade. "Come, face your destiny," He said. "Rather now than *add* to your sins."

Ronson backed off, his body now pressed against the doors; the woman, bearing Taylor's small form, was almost through Tove's entrance to Hell.

"I'll take my chances," Ronson said to Tove's retreating back. Fumbling for and finding a door handle, he quickly turned it and pulled. The door opened easily; he silently prayed that the outer world still existed.

The rain had stopped but the air smelled dry, fetid even; between the gap it was so dark that he could barely see what lay beyond.

Slamming the door shut behind him, he left the mansion to head grimly into the unknown.

It was very dark outside.

Glyyn Owen Barrass
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Glynn lives in the North East of England and has been writing since late 2006. His work has been published in a number of magazines and anthologies including Bound For Evil,' 'Candlelight,' 'Crossed Genres,' 'Ethereal Tales,' 'Horrormania!' and 'Tales of the Talisman.' He is also the author of the acclaimed apocalyptic zombie novella, "The King of Deadtown," available from bookstores and direct from the publisher, Dead Letter Press.

To Hell is his 25th appearance in print, and is based entirely on a nightmare that he is very pleased that he suffered.

Glynn is also very proud that his H.P. Lovecraft bibliography can be found on the website of Chaosium Inc, the creators of the Call of Cthulhu role-playing game, as he so loves that Love-craft.

He shares his home with his cat Sisko, and a few friendly ghosts that he's met over the years.

About the Editor

Jonathan J. Schlosser first discovered horror through The Bachman Books, which, of course, turned out to be written by Stephen King. He has been writing horror, fantasy, and science fiction for a little over a year, in which time he has published twenty-seven short stories. He is currently working on a novel, *Falling Over Jerusalem*, along with this anthology series. He lives in Grand Rapids.

You can visit his website at www.jonathanjschlosser.com.